

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The Philosopher as Reverse-Engineer

ALEXANDER PRESCOTT-COUCH

Philosophers do not have a reputation for being pragmatic. When offered a chance to avoid execution, Socrates used his window of escape to deliver a series of abstract arguments explaining why the principle required him to stick around for the hemlock. The picture is not so different nowadays, where popular culture often depicts philosophy professors as absent-minded bumblers lost in abstruse thought, charmingly unable to master the simple tasks of life.¹ Basically, so the stereotypes go, we are a bunch of neurotics who take comfort in abstractions as a way to escape life rather than live it.

I suspect these stereotypes are not a coincidence. Behind them is the idea that how philosophers approach deep issues of human concern are somehow cut off from the context of concrete, lived existence. Fixation on the abstract argument, obscure jargon, farfetched thought experiments and nitpicky conceptual distinctions can make it easy to forget why it all matters in the first place.

Matthieu Queloz's *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering* (2021) aims to elucidate an important counter-tradition to this philosophical style, the tradition of so-called 'Pragmatic Genealogy'. Pragmatic Genealogy has two aspects. One aspect is a philosophical project. When it comes to understanding important concepts like knowledge or truth or justice, instead of orienting our inquiry around the *Socratic* Question – 'What is X?' – we should instead orient our inquiry around the *Pragmatic* Question: what is the *point* or *purpose* of our possessing the concept X? The second aspect is a particular tool to help execute this project: 'genealogies', which in Queloz's reconstruction are idealized state-of-nature models that serve to help us understand the functions served by various conceptual practices.

A paradigm case is Edward Craig's approach to knowledge (1990).² As post-Gettier analyses of knowledge became increasingly baroque, Craig

1 A notable exception is the Christian film *God Is Not Dead*, in which philosophers are depicted as self-confident debate-club types with cosmic-scale daddy issues.

2 Although the real hero of the book is Bernard Williams, whose *Truth and Truthfulness* adapts and extends Craig's methodology. As Queloz notes (131), Craig himself did not originally call his story a 'genealogy', although he later came to adopt the term (Craig 2007).

suggested that rather than asking what knowledge *is*, we should ask what the concept of knowledge *does* for us. To figure this out, we turn to an imaginary state-of-nature story, a ‘genealogy’. We imagine a small community of cooperative language users who have different experiences, skills and talents. Individuals in this community have a need for true beliefs about their environment, and they are dependent on others for information. Given these circumstances, such individuals have a need to identify ‘good informants’, the people they can rely on for information about a particular issue. Craig hypothesizes that such a community would introduce a concept to identify good informants, which, he argues, will be much like our concept of knowledge. In this way, Craig’s genealogy ‘reverse-engineers’ the ‘function’ of our concept of knowledge (identifying good informants).

This sketch of Craig’s approach might immediately give rise to a number of concerns. First, do we really need an elaborate state-of-nature story to make the point that our concept of knowledge can function to flag good informants? The state-of-nature story might seem like a colourful but laborious way of making the point that could be made more directly in a non-narrative manner. Second, is not the account of the value of knowledge suggested overly instrumental? It seems like we often care about knowledge for its own sake, not merely as an instrument to pick out good informants (or for anything else practical, for that matter).

Third, the ‘genealogical’ story Craig tells would seem to have little to do with the meticulous historical reconstruction of a practice’s development, the kind of genealogy [Foucault \(1978\)](#) recommended and saw Nietzsche as executing. Are not such models by their nature simplistic and insensitive to the texture of historical actuality? Can one really learn anything about how our *actual* concept of knowledge arose from such a ‘just so’ story? As Nietzsche has taught us, our concepts change in response to local circumstances and interests. Consequently, one might be worried that such simple universal models are misleading and cannot honour the genealogical tradition’s historicist spirit.

Queloz’s book provides interesting and detailed answers to these questions (and others), making the case for the philosophical significance of the kind of functional analysis with historical elaboration that Pragmatic Genealogies enable. These answers lead Queloz to discuss ways in which the basic approach can be extended and elaborated. The functions of our conceptual practices can be ‘self-effacing’ in that the practices may only be functional if individuals do not engage in them for reasons of functionality. Rather than concentrating on *basic* needs, such genealogies might focus attention on more historically local needs. Instead of focusing on a *single* set of needs, these genealogical stories can incorporate more historically extended narrative complexity, helping us to grasp the multiple, interconnected functions that may be present in certain historically-inflected concepts. In discussing these extensions and elaborations, Queloz also argues that Pragmatic Genealogy has been employed in

different ways by thinkers such as Hume, Nietzsche, Fricker and, most prominently, Bernard Williams. The book therefore also has an important historical element – it aims to show that there is a historical tradition of Pragmatic Genealogy that spans the Analytic–Continental divide.

Before going any further, I should mention that this is a great book. Beyond providing the most sophisticated existing account of Pragmatic Genealogy, it uses Pragmatic Genealogy to explore a number of other, independently interesting philosophical themes. For instance, Queloz provides deft discussions of how to reconcile abstract philosophical analysis with appreciation of local historical context, as well as how to bring together functionalist ways of thinking with more humanistic modes of understanding.³ Moreover, the prose has a kind of effortless elegance that reminds one of the book's primary inspiration, Bernard Williams. It is possible to read it for pleasure, not merely from duty.

My comments will proceed as follows. I will begin by offering some motivation for Pragmatic Genealogy. I will then discuss Pragmatic Genealogy's philosophical project and raise some challenges for replacing the Socratic Question with the Pragmatic Question. With that discussion as background, I will turn to the tool employed to execute that project, Pragmatic Genealogy, and argue that this tool is more limited than Queloz's discussion suggests. Finally, I will consider challenges to reconciling the functionalist elements of Pragmatic Genealogy with humanistic understanding in the way that Queloz and Williams wish to do.

1. *Why should we want to replace the Socratic Question with the Pragmatic Question?*

To understand the significance of Pragmatic Genealogy, we should begin by thinking of the broad philosophical motivations for replacing the Socratic Question with the Pragmatic Question.

I think there are three central motivations.⁴ First, raising the Pragmatic Question can be motivated by a *metaphysical* thesis: some brand of anti-realism with respect to a domain of discourse. For instance, one reason we might inquire into what moral language 'does for us' is that we suspect that there is something that it *does not* do for us – namely, enable us to refer to moral facts (construed in a robustly realist way (see [Enoch 2011](#))). If, in light of these anti-realist assumptions, we still wish to conserve our moral discourse, we need to find something else for it to do.⁵ So we raise the Pragmatic

3 In this way, the book explores the tensions that occupied Bernard Williams.

4 This account of the motivations overlaps somewhat with Queloz's discussion of the advantages of conceptual reverse-engineering (30–31). However, that discussion handles the advantages of taking a *pragmatic* approach together with the advantages of taking a *model-building* approach. I think it best to split up these issues.

5 And, crucially, that thing for it to do should be valuable. This is how the first motivation links up with the second.

Question. Answering the Pragmatic Question thus offers a way of reconciling metaphysical anti-realism with the maintenance of our conceptual practices.

Second, the Pragmatic Question is sometimes motivated by a substantive *axiological* thesis: that what is ultimately valuable is ‘practical’⁶ (rather than, say, epistemic). For instance, take knowledge. You might be a ‘realist’ about knowledge (who is not?) but still wonder why and whether knowledge matters. Imagine a simple answer: knowledge matters because humans have a set of *sui generis* epistemic interests in knowledge. Philosophers of a pragmatic disposition typically think that, as a matter of axiological fact, this is false.⁷ Things like knowledge can matter only derivatively.⁸ Consequently, if we are to show that knowledge matters, we will need to explain why it matters by reference to something of more fundamental value, which is assumed to be something pragmatist-y like social coordination or achieving our aims.⁹

Third, the Pragmatic Question is sometimes motivated by a *methodological* thesis: we can get insight into how we should change our practices by seeing where they came from and what holds them in place. Exactly how to move from claims about the explanation of our practices to claims about how they should be revised is a somewhat delicate matter. However, the rough story is this: we use the explanation of how we came to possess our concepts to identify the functions of those concepts, and we use information

6 It is hard to give an explicit characterization of exactly which kinds of ‘practical values’ pragmatists typically focus on and why, although they tend to be united by being ‘basic’, rather than highfalutin. The typical ones are: social coordination, decreases in social conflict and helping achieve aims. These are often things that, *as a matter of fact*, everyone cares about (and knows they care about). More philosophically, they are often values about which it is comparatively easy to motivate the claim that it is rational to care about them, as they are often necessary means to or background conditions of achieving other aims.

7 I use the term ‘axiological fact’ for convenience. I do not assume that pragmatists are committed to a robust realist account of these axiological facts.

8 In Queloz’s discussion, this axiological assumption is introduced via certain assumptions about human ‘needs’, such as the assumption that there is not a primitive ‘need’ for knowledge or Kantian respect. If there were such a need, a Pragmatic Genealogy of e.g. knowledge would be superfluous, since acquiring knowledge would already be a way of meeting our needs. While Queloz allows quite a bit of historical flexibility when it comes to human needs, it is quite crucial for Pragmatic Genealogy to put some limits on what our needs are, limits that provide room for Pragmatic Genealogy to provide insight into the value of our conceptual practices.

9 Sometimes the axiological/normative assumptions are slightly more complicated. Pragmatic Genealogies are sometimes motivated not by a thesis of *what ultimately matters* but rather by a thesis about matters *in a particular domain*, such as politics. For instance, we might wish to justify the value of knowledge to those of various political persuasions, some of which take knowledge to be intrinsically valuable but others which do not. Whatever the ultimate value of knowledge, we may be interested in an account of its value that can be recognized by those of different political viewpoints. ‘Thin’ practical values often seem like good candidates for values that can be the object of such an overlapping consensus. Here, there is an underlying normative political theory that gives primacy to pragmatist-y values rather than a fundamental axiological theory.

about those functions to assess the concepts, as well as potentially to revise them to better fulfil those functions.

Now, you do not need to share all these philosophical commitments to find Pragmatic Genealogy valuable. For example, Queloz argues that Pragmatic Genealogy is compatible with denying the axiological commitment, at least in some form. However, if you share none of these commitments, you are unlikely to be sympathetic to the approach. Moreover, the commitments are loosely interconnected into a broad *Weltanschauung*: when we consider how we orient our lives, we need concepts that are tailored to us. We should not *submit ourselves* to the definitions of the concepts we have but rather construct those concepts for ourselves on the basis of our needs and wants.¹⁰

2. *Can we replace the Socratic Question with the Pragmatic Question?*

To reorient philosophy away from the Socratic Question and towards the Pragmatic Question, we need to clearly separate the two questions. At first glance, this seems easy to do – after all, what something *is* and what *good it does* seem like distinct properties, so a question inquiring about one is distinct from a question inquiring about the other. From this, one might conclude that one could, as a general matter, pursue one *kind* of questioning without pursuing the other kind. For example, one could, as a general philosophical strategy, replace Socratic Questions with Pragmatic Questions, as Pragmatic Genealogists recommend.¹¹

However, things are not so simple. First, when we examine how more sophisticated forms of Socratic Questioning proceed, we see that forms of Pragmatic Questioning often *already* play a role within it. Consider a recent book, *Causation: A User's Guide* by L.A. Paul and Ned Hall, which deals with the question ‘What is causation?’ a Socratic question if there ever was one. Parts of the book concern the typical back-and-forth of proposed analysis and counterexample, the kind of thing that makes pragmatists think philosophy has gone off the rails. However, in the book’s methodological discussions peppered throughout the first two chapters, Paul and Hall discuss a number of considerations relevant to a good analysis besides fit with intuitive case judgments, including (i) fit with scientific practice, (ii) fit into a broader metaphysical theory, (iii) illuminating some aspect of scientific

10 Of course, you might share these commitments with respect to some concepts but not others. Consequently, you might find Pragmatic Genealogy philosophically illuminating in some cases but not others. For instance, you might be impressed by a Pragmatic Genealogy of knowledge but become queasy when given a Pragmatic Genealogy of opera. In this way, different philosophers might reasonably differ about the appropriate scope of Pragmatic Genealogy.

11 To be clear, Queloz does not recommend doing this in all cases (45).

inquiry¹², including (iv) the way science helps us practically.¹³ That is, a sophisticated approach to Socratic Questioning does not neglect considerations of how concepts help serve practical needs, but rather already includes them.¹⁴ However, as I will discuss later, it includes them in a way different from the way suggested by Pragmatic Genealogists.¹⁵

Second, posing and answering many Pragmatic Questions often requires independently answering philosophically substantive Socratic Questions. This is particularly so if we wish to use Pragmatic Genealogy to illuminate a richer set of more historically local values, as Queloz does. To illustrate the point, consider Christoph Möllers' *The Three Branches* (2013), an example that Queloz discusses (234). Möllers aims to understand the point of separating powers into legislative, executive, and judicial branches of governments. According to Möllers, this division functions to help negotiate tensions between modern ideals of individual and collective self-determination. The executive and legislative branch serve the need for collective self-determination, while the judicial branch helps meet the need for individual self-determination.

I find this an illuminating explanation but note the following points. First, ideals like individual and collective self-determination are not self-interpreting, and understanding their nature seems like a paradigmatic Socratic exercise. So, it seems the answer to this Pragmatic Question presupposes answers to other Socratic Questions.¹⁶ Second, the way these different branches 'serve' the needs for collective and individual self-determination is not merely causal-functional – there are other constitutive and symbolic connections between these institutions and these ideals that seem relevant. However, these constitutive and symbolic connections are not things that pragmatists typically countenance in answering the Pragmatic Question, nor are they things that Pragmatic Genealogies are in a good position to illuminate

12 For instance, an analysis of causation might clarify notions of evidence, statistical independence etc. See [Woodward 2014](#).

13 Attention to the practical benefits of causal knowledge is also a feature of James [Woodward's \(2003\)](#) influential interventionist view of causal structure.

14 Moreover, as the case of causation makes clear, there may be a number of *distinct* practical needs that the concept helps us satisfy and they may pull us in different directions. For instance, in addition to helping us pick out relations of manipulative control in the world (e.g. [Woodward 2003, 2014](#)), causal talk is also crucial for responsibility and accountability judgments ([Prescott-Couch 2017](#)).

15 To preview: First, it includes them in a more modest way, as one factor among others that may be considered in answering a Socratic Question. Second, the *way* it considers how concepts serve our needs may be mediated by the practical value of broader theories and practices within which they play a role. On this, more anon.

16 One might think this is more of a descriptive, 'sociological' enterprise rather than a Socratic one. But is this so? What are the conditions for success here? Isn't it that the branches of government *actually* respond to these tensions, not just that individuals think they do? (*Do individuals have any such thoughts?*)

(a point to which I will return). Rather, they seem the kind of relations we are better able to discern in the process of broader Socratic theorizing.

So far, I have discussed ways in which Socratic and Pragmatic Questions may be interwoven. However, they may also operate at different ‘levels’ in a way that can create problems for replacing one with the other. For instance, let us take the concept of justice. How does possessing the concept of justice serve our needs? Queloz discusses this issue indirectly via an examination of Hume’s Pragmatic Genealogy of justice. According to Hume, the ‘artificial virtue’ of justice (which for Hume primarily concerns respect for property, promises and the government) functions to prevent conflicts over resources in conditions of scarcity and limited benevolence.¹⁷ This all seems fine as far as it goes. However, note that this does not give us much by way of a theory of justice. For all this genealogy tells us is the broad *job description* of justice – it does not tell us *how that job should be performed*. Or, to put the point another way, we have a genealogy of the *concept* of justice, but what Socratic questions about justice often aim to illuminate is the correct *conception* of justice.¹⁸

This is not a local problem with Hume’s particular genealogy of justice. For this kind of issue arises in cases when the Pragmatic Question is applied to concepts that pick out commonly accepted sets of norms, such as the concepts of morality and justice. One thing that such norms typically do is coordinate behaviour and attenuate conflicts (by providing commonly accepted standards for resolving them). Consequently, simple *having* commonly accepted standards, whatever their content, has certain beneficial effects. Given the kind of values mentioned earlier that pragmatists tend to focus on (coordination, getting along, achieving our aims), what Pragmatic Genealogy often identifies as the function of these rules is simply the effects of *having an agreed set of rules*. However, such effects are distinct from the effects due to rules *having a particular content*, and it is the right content of morality or justice that Socratic Questioning is aiming to identify. So, the Pragmatic Question is not really touching on the key issue that Socratic Questioners are grappling with.

Of course, one might try to approach specifying the content of morality or justice by looking at the way in which various different norm contents would affect various human needs. However, if we were to do this, we would have to adopt some highly controversial assumptions about the nature of morality or justice. In particular, we would see morality and justice as tools for the promotion of certain states of affairs, namely the satisfaction of various human needs. However, both the consequentialist structure of such a theory,

17 In this case, as Queloz notes, we have a concept that serves certain *higher-order needs*, the need to adjudicate among various ways to satisfy other needs.

18 See Rawls 1971: 5. Rawls takes the concept/conception distinction from Hart (1961, 155–9).

as well as the particular consequences to be promoted (needs satisfaction), are (obviously) highly controversial within discussions of these topics. So, taking the pragmatic approach in this context is just an indirect means of begging some of the most central questions in moral and political philosophy. That is, rather than offering a fresh approach that gets us away from pedantic Socraticism, we just have a simplistic version of a well-trodden view within the long Socratic tradition.¹⁹

Let me sum up so far. I have noted Socratic Questioning often includes Pragmatic Questioning within it, and certain Pragmatic Questions will require answers to Socratic Questions. I have also argued that, for a number of important cases, examining the function of our conceptual practice will not help us much in answering the Socratic Question, and the Socratic Question is the one that is really practically pressing.

Is this a problem? Noting that Socratic and Pragmatic questioning can be interconnected does not show that asking the Pragmatic Question is misguided. However, it does suggest a more modest role for functional considerations. When it comes to most philosophical questions, considerations about the basic needs served by conceptual practices may be useful to consider, but I see little reason to give *exclusive* weight to functional considerations or to give them some superordinary role, particularly in comparison to some of the other considerations canvassed earlier such as fit with intuitive judgments, science, social theory and metaphysics. This is because, in many cases, the relevant functional considerations are interconnected with other theoretical issues and because starting with functionality can be a way of begging substantive questions through the guise of methodology. It is better to take the more modest approach of considering functional claims within the context of other complementary and competing considerations, in the way that typical Socratic exchange unfolds.

I believe confusion around these points is generated by a set of assumptions that appear to run through Queloz's discussion and which seem to

19 There are ways of making such a view more sophisticated by adding self-effacement. However, then we would just be re-hashing debates about more sophisticated forms of consequentialism, not offering a new approach. Of course, it is not necessarily an objection to the pragmatic approach that, when applied to the content of morality or justice, it ends up committed to consequentialism. Consequentialism might be true, and the pragmatic approach might offer a novel argument in its favor. However, this would be an unwelcome result for Queloz, who wishes to distance Pragmatic Genealogy from consequentialism (183–85). In order to do this, the normative role of functions in the pragmatic approach (when applied to the content of morality or justice) would need to differ from the normative role for consequences in consequentialist theories. However, I do not see how this distinction can be maintained, even when one adds complexities like self-effacing functionality, which I will discuss later (another option would be to deny that the pragmatic approach should be applied to the content of morality or justice. This option is available to Queloz, who claims that he does not see Pragmatic Genealogy as the One True Method (43)).

be shared by proponents of Pragmatic Genealogy: that a particular kind of question ('What is X?') needs to have a particular kind of answer (a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for X), and this answer needs to be arrived at and justified by a particular method (match to intuitive extension). However, questions of this type need not have that kind of answer, and even if they do, they need not arrive at/justify that answer using a method of intuition fitting.

3. *Does answering the Pragmatic Question require Pragmatic Genealogy?*

Let us now turn to the *genealogical* aspect of Pragmatic Genealogy. As previously mentioned, what Queloz means by 'genealogy' is not an actual historical explanation of our conceptual practice. Rather, it is a kind of idealized model that aims to illuminate the function of conceptual practice.^{20,21} Is the kind of genealogy that Queloz discusses a good analytical tool for answering the Pragmatic Question?

One might think that such genealogical models are unnecessary. After all, are not there ways of figuring out these functional claims without appealing to such state-of-nature stories? In many cases, the potential functions seem intuitively obvious, and they can be vindicated by showing that the functional

20 To be clear, we should not think of these idealized models as necessarily in opposition to historical accounts of how a practice arose. For such models *can* be used to illuminate aspects of the history of our practices in particular cases – those in which part of the historical explanation of how some practice arose is that the practice served the relevant needs. Here, we use the model to perspicaciously put on display historical-explanatory information of an abstract kind – roughly, that there was *some* process by which the fact that the practice served these needs led to the practice being developed or maintained. That said, while Pragmatic Genealogies *can* be used to provide historical explanations, they need not be. The functional information they provide can be used for other purposes, such as providing normative reasons to adopt or revise a particular practice. For instance, as Queloz discusses, Miranda Fricker (2007) provides a Pragmatic Genealogy of testimonial justice not to provide an explanation of testimonial injustice, but rather to illuminate why testimonial injustice matters (Queloz argues (199–201) that the functional pressures illuminated by Fricker's Pragmatic Genealogy can be combined with other causal factors to provide a causal explanation of the actual extent of testimonial injustice. However, even if this were true, it does not show that Fricker's Pragmatic Genealogy *needs* to be employed for explanatory purposes). Moreover, there is a general reason that *some* Pragmatic Genealogies will not be explanatorily useful: 'practical pressure' in the normative sense will not yield any 'practical pressure' in the causal sense if no agents (or institutions) are in touch with the relevant normative reasons.

21 To my ears, calling state-of-nature models 'genealogies' invites confusion, although this is not Queloz's fault. He is adopting the term from Craig and Williams, who use it for the kind of state-of-nature story Queloz describes. Nevertheless, the term raises pseudo-problems about how we move from origin to assessment (how to avoid the so-called 'genealogical fallacy'). The boring answer is that we are often not being given information about the origin, so there is no inference from origin to assessment and therefore no opportunity for a fallacious inference.

hypothesis can explain many features of the concept. This is, broadly speaking, Woodward's strategy when discussing his functional view of causation (2003, 2014), and it is what Fricker now recommends (2019). A state-of-nature story might be one analytical tool too many.

Queloz spends a chapter responding to this concern. Queloz says there are two reasons that such state-of-nature stories are valuable. First, they help us better understand 'self-effacing' functionality – cases in which for a practice to serve its function, the agents must possess autonomous motives to engage in it.²² Second, they help us better understand more complex, historically inflected functional relations, ones in which a practice has a number of different functions and serves a variety of historically local needs.

This chapter contains illuminating discussions about the use of models and the way abstract theorizing can enhance our understanding of historical particulars. Nevertheless, I am sceptical of some of Queloz's arguments. While a full defence of this scepticism would take us too far afield, I will simply note that there are many cases of philosophers articulating and defending claims about self-effacement and historically local functionality without the state-of-nature apparatus. When it comes to self-effacement, sophisticated forms of consequentialism have self-effacing elements, but few appeals to state-of-nature stories to articulate and defend such views. And why should they? It seems you can make points about self-effacement directly, for example, simply by stating that for a practice to achieve its function, participants may not or cannot be thinking about the ultimate aim of the practice much of the time.

Similarly, there are more historically subtle versions of functional approaches that do not appeal to the state of nature. For instance, consider Charles Beitz's (2009) view of human rights. According to Beitz, the concept of human rights functions to flag matters of international concern that can justify various international protective and restorative measures ranging from military intervention to forms of assistance (compare Craig on labelling good informants). This conception of human rights is broadly pragmatic/functional (Beitz calls it 'practical'). Moreover, it is *historically local* – Beitz thinks that the concept of human rights is important *given* certain historically contingent circumstances (e.g. the existence of nation-states, NGOs and multi-national corporations). However, rather than proceeding via an historically-inflected state-of-nature story, Beitz proceeds in a more direct

22 Queloz writes, 'Where functionality is self-effacing, it is a functional requirement on the practice's functionality that participants not be primarily motivated by awareness of that functionality, but when they acquire awareness of it, this awareness is fully compatible with – and may indeed encourage – confident engagement in the practice on any reasonable conception of it' (55). Self-effacing practices are distinct from *necessarily* effaced practices, those in which in order for the practice to serve a function, the participants must not be aware that it serves that function.

way. Moreover, this directness does not prevent him from dealing with the complexities of multiple, historically local functions that various aspects of human rights practice serve. Rather, the more direct approach enables him to propose more subtle, theoretically complex kinds of functions for human rights practice.

To be clear, Queloz does not hold that Pragmatic Genealogy is *necessary* for making claims about self-effacement. Rather, he holds that it is ‘called for’ in that it allows one to ‘explain and understand more’ about cases of self-effacement and local functionality (Queloz, personal correspondence). This makes the dialectic a bit complicated, as one would need to look at the details of the philosophical projects I mention here to show that adding in the genealogical apparatus would not enable them to explain more. I, therefore, leave this as a hypothesis.

However, let us leave these arguments aside. For they concern whether there are particular answers to the Pragmatic Question that Pragmatic Genealogy is in a privileged position to articulate and vindicate. I would now like to consider a different issue: whether there are certain kinds of answers to the Pragmatic Question that Pragmatic Genealogies are *not* in a good position to articulate and defend.

I think there are. One structural feature of Pragmatic Genealogies is that they suggest an *atomistic assessment* of our conceptual practices. That is, they examine the effects of possessing certain concepts in isolation rather than looking at them in their role within broader theories. I alluded to this point in the above discussion of causation. *One* consideration in developing an account of causation is to think about the way that the concept of causation helps us *on its own, in everyday life* – e.g., perhaps the conceptual distinction between causation and correlation is crucial to identifying which associations we can exploit for the sake of manipulative control (as Woodward (2003) claims). Yet, as mentioned in our previous discussion, there are other, more indirect ways in which the concept of causation might help us practically: for example, by helping us clarify aspects of scientific inquiry (e.g. how to draw causal conclusions from statistical data (Paul and Hall 2013)), or by being an essential element in a broader philosophy of science or metaphysical theory that, *as a whole theory*, helps us.²³ State-of-nature stories do not help us understand such indirect practical roles for our concepts, so fixation on them ends up leaving out important ways in which conceptual practices may provide us with practical aid.

23 Identifying such indirect means by which concepts can be helpful involves doing something similar to what Carnap (1950) called ‘practical explication’ in which an imprecise concept is made more precise in order to fit into and clarify aspects of a broader theory. Here, I am adding the point that such a theory may be *practically* valuable, and so a concept’s practical value might be inherited through its role in a practically valuable theory.

This point becomes particularly important, I believe, when we want to *engineer* our concepts, not merely explain why we have the concepts we have. Take the concept of ‘work’. How should we engineer such a concept so that it best serves our needs? If you are of a Marxist bent, you might think that the most benefit would come from a concept that would be engineered in a way that would integrate into and clarify Marxist social theory, for example, a conception of work tied to the production of surplus value. Viewed in isolation of this broader theory, it is hard to see the benefit of engineering the concept in this way. However, such a concept might help us *indirectly* by clarifying aspects of a practically beneficial social theory, one that for example enables us to understand exploitation and emancipate ourselves from it.²⁴ Whatever the merits of this account of the practical benefits of the concept of work, it is not the *kind* of account that a pragmatic genealogical model helps us to understand.²⁵

4. *Can sophisticated Pragmatic Genealogies reconcile naturalism and humanism?*

A recurring theme in Queloz’s book is whether and how pragmatic approaches are compatible with a humanistic, Williams-esque sensibility. Initially, there seems to be tension here. Pragmatic Genealogy examines our concepts and practices by considering how they help us satisfy basic human needs. However, says the humanistic sensibility, there is more to human life than finding the means to the satisfaction of basic needs.

In particular, there are three main ways in which pragmatic genealogy seems ‘un-humanistic’: it seems (i) overly ‘instrumentalist’ in orientation, (ii) insensitive to things that matter and (iii) fails to take seriously historical difference. Queloz argues these concerns rest on an overly simplistic understanding of Pragmatic Genealogy, which, when applied in a sophisticated way, is not only compatible with but a crucial means to pursuing philosophy as a humanistic discipline. I’ll discuss the first two concerns.

Queloz argues that even if Pragmatic Genealogies provide us with instrumental reasons for valuing our conceptual practices, the method does not require that individuals *think* in an instrumental way. In fact, it might be that these instrumental benefits can only be achieved if individuals do *not*

24 See Horgan (2021) for discussion of the concept of work.

25 This is not to say that one *could not* construct a genealogical model that would ‘explain’ the function of such concepts via their role in clarifying practically helpful theories. One could imagine a community that had all the aspects of the relevant scientific, social or metaphysical theory but lacked the relevant concept (e.g. causation, work). One could then note the improved practical situation of the individuals in the state-of-nature story after the introduction of the relevant concept. However, in such a contrived model, the apparatus of the state-of-nature is not really doing any important work. All the work would be being done by the fit between the concept and the theories possessed by the agents independently of and prior to the concept’s introduction.

think in a merely instrumental way. Pragmatic genealogy can account for *self-effacing* conceptual practices. Williams' genealogy of the virtues of truth is a paradigm case.

However, I do not think appealing to the way that our conceptual practices can be self-effacing fully answers the humanist's concern. The concern with instrumentalism is not just with an *instrumentalist attitude* on the part of agents. It is rather that in the *instrumental explanation of why things matter*. At bottom, most of the things we care about matter only instrumentally, even if we need to think otherwise to prevent disaster. It is this claim about what ultimately matters, what we might think of as the pragmatist's stingy axiology, that seems in tension with the humanist sensibility, which typically prides itself on sensitivity to a wide variety of (sometimes rarefied) values.

Partially in response to this kind of concern, Queloz argues that Pragmatic Genealogy need not be so axiologically stingy, even when it focuses attention on basic needs. Here, Queloz appeals to Williams' idiosyncratic theory of intrinsic value, arguing that even though pragmatic genealogy provides instrumental explanations of the value of the thing, these instrumental explanations are a crucial part of the explanation of that thing's *intrinsic* value. This needs a bit of unpacking.

To go slightly into the details (sorry!), Williams (as reconstructed by Queloz) thinks the following conditions are sufficient for something to have intrinsic value:

(SM) *The Sense-Making Condition*: Individuals can coherently treat X as an intrinsic good, which is to say that they can make sense of X as an intrinsic value from the inside.

(PN) *The Practical Necessity Condition*: It is necessary (or nearly necessary) for basic human purposes and needs that human beings should treat X as an intrinsic good, which is to say it is a practical necessity, for them to treat X as intrinsically valuable.

For example, take the virtue of Sincerity, the skilful disposition to tell the truth when asked. What is it for being sincere to have intrinsic, rather than merely instrumental, value? According to Williams, for Sincerity to have intrinsic value, individuals must first be able to 'make sense' of Sincerity's being intrinsically valuable. 'Making sense' has both a psychological and normative aspect. Individuals need to *treat* sincerity as being intrinsically good, but they need to do so coherently, by rationally embedding Sincerity into their broader normative perspective. This embedding can take historically different forms. For instance, Sincerity might be embedded within a broader honour ethic or in a broader Kantian ethic of respect for persons. However, just making sense of Sincerity is not sufficient for Sincerity's counting as an intrinsic value. It also needs to be 'practically necessary' that Sincerity be treated as an intrinsic value.

With this view of intrinsic value, Queloz argues that pragmatic genealogy is not only compatible with a range of intrinsic values but can even help vindicate them. This is because a Pragmatic Genealogy can help vindicate the *Practical Necessity Condition* on intrinsic value. This observation should help square the pragmatic approach's focus on basic needs (what might seem like an overly narrow focus) with the wider range of things that we care about for their own sake.

There are two problems with this response, I think. One is that Williams' view of intrinsic value is idiosyncratic and faces challenges. Second, it seems odd to let Pragmatic Genealogy's humanistic credentials rest on it.

First, Williams' conditions are not plausible sufficient conditions for something having intrinsic value. As a general matter, it is not sufficient for something to be intrinsically valuable that it be coherently intrinsically valued and that this coherent valuing be practically necessary. Imagine a community that believes that praying to Jesus Christ has intrinsic value, and this belief is embedded in a coherent set of mutually supporting attitudes and intentions. Also, imagine that this belief is *very* useful at the social level – it promotes charity, social harmony, existential consolation etc. – and absent this practice, we would have selfishness, conflict and death-of-God wailing and gnashing of teeth. Does praying to Jesus Christ, therefore, have *intrinsic* value? It does not seem so. Moreover, does not this depend on whether there is a Jesus Christ?

More generally, there seems to be a kind of axiological alchemy in concocting intrinsic value from intrinsic valuing plus practical necessity. What intuitive plausibility do these conditions have? And why are they conjoined? To me, this account seems reverse-engineered in the bad sense – designed to defuse an objection in an ad hoc manner. Matters are not helped by the fact that an entirely different view of intrinsic value is required when it comes to the intrinsic importance of basic needs.²⁶ There is of course more to say here, but resting Pragmatic Genealogy's humanistic credentials on this view seems risky.

Perhaps one can look beyond Queloz's book for a different way in which Pragmatic Genealogy can be reconciled with humanist sensibility. In more recent work, Queloz (2021) suggests a distinct manner in which the kind of instrumental relations Pragmatic Genealogies highlight might complement non-instrumental reasons we have to engage in our practices.²⁷ Discussing blame, Queloz argues that blame's function is to coordinate moral sensibilities by alerting and sanctioning those who are insufficiently responsive to the community's conception of moral reasons. However, says Queloz,

26 Williams is only offering a sufficient condition for something having intrinsic value, but why should there be two completely different conceptions of intrinsic value in his account?

27 Thanks to Queloz for alerting me to this paper.

this account of blame's function serves not as a *justification* of the practice of blame but simply as a (functional-causal) *explanation* of the practice, the practice being justified by the moral reasons that render individuals blameworthy. Nevertheless, this account of blame's function is, according to Queloz, not normatively inert. First, it gives us an additional reason to cultivate the practice of blame (it solves a coordination problem). Second, it can 'strengthen our confidence' in the practice of blame by indicating that it is not a hold-over from an enchanted world. Third, it can indicate when participating in the practice might be pointless or counterproductive. These are all ways that instrumental considerations might compliment rather than conflict with the humanist's focus on the internal standards and values of the practice.

While I lack space to extensively argue the case, I am sceptical that these considerations provide much comfort to the humanist. The basic issue is that it is hard for a causal explanation to serve these various normative functions without the explanatory considerations also in some sense being 'justificatory', that is, yielding reasons to engage in the practice or modify it in some way. This is not a big concern when it comes to Queloz's first consideration, since the additional instrumental reasons point in the same direction as the other reasons. That I can make money doing philosophy does not undermine my non-instrumental reasons for pursuing philosophy, it just gives me an additional reason.²⁸ However, there seems more opportunity for conflict when it comes to the second and third considerations. For instance, even if instrumental considerations strengthen our confidence by indicating that the practice *as a whole* is not a hold-over, they might suggest that many *aspects* of the practice are. After all, nature is not the perfect engineer. What should we think of those aspects? If the relevant instrumental benefits are supposed to increase our confidence in the practice, then should not comparative instrumental costs correspondingly decrease our confidence in the aspects of the practice that are not instrumentally valuable? Taking instrumental considerations seriously creates pressure to reengineer our practices to make them more instrumentally valuable.

Perhaps this pressure is very weak because these instrumental benefits are not very important, at least in comparison to other considerations. But if that is the case, then it does not seem like Pragmatic Genealogy is adding much of anything to the humanist's toolkit, so it is not crucial to pursuing philosophy as a humanistic discipline, as Queloz claims. The point is that shifting from justification to explanation does not do much to alleviate the tension between the humanistic sensibility and the engineering sensibility.

28 That said, appealing to the instrumental considerations to buck us up when our confidence in other reasons runs out seems a bit weird. To me, it gives off a 'If you don't like my principles, I have others!' vibe.

Finally, an additional concern the humanistic critic might have with a focus on instrumental relations is that such a focus directs attention away from important symbolic and constitutive relations among our values. For example, when it comes to morality, it might be that adhering to certain norms *constitutes* a valuable relation of mutual recognition (Scanlon 1998), or, in the case of justice, that the basic structure conforming to certain principles *constitutes* citizens' freedom and equality. These are the kinds of relations that Pragmatic Genealogy, by its nature, does not have a way of getting a grip on and so, therefore, tends to neglect.²⁹ This neglect might give the humanist pause. For good humanistic moral theory typically has interpretive elements that Pragmatic Genealogy ignores.

5. Conclusion

Should philosophers turn to Pragmatic Genealogy? Sometimes, for certain goals. I have raised some objections to different aspects of Quelo's discussion, but these objections, even if sound, do not show the method is useless. They only show that it has certain limits.

Nevertheless, I think these limits are important because they point to concerns about the broader *Weltanschauung* behind Pragmatic Genealogy – 'Our concepts are made for us, not us for our concepts, and if our concepts are not made for us, well they should be'. I believe this view is supposed to be liberating, but to me, it feels constraining. For it forces us to choose between the role of the apologist and the role of the engineer. There is a deep psychological temptation to think of society as built *for us*, like a car or a custom-shop Fender Stratocaster. We should be cautious about giving into that temptation. But when we resist it, and find problems with our practices, must those problems be engineering problems? A Williams-esque sensibility might look for ways of responding to tensions and ambivalences besides trying to engineer them away.³⁰

29 Perhaps it is theoretically possible for a pragmatic approach to adopt a more capacious notion of 'function' beyond a causal-functional one, for example one that might encompass things like constitutive and expressive relations. However, if we do this, Pragmatic Genealogy is no longer a privileged tool for answering the Pragmatic Question. Moreover, the pragmatic approach more generally becomes much less informative. Identifying constitutive and expressive relationships involves the kind of subtle and sustained Socratic (interpretive) argumentation that many taking the pragmatic approach would like to avoid, so the differences between the approaches will seem less pronounced. More broadly: the less structure we build into the pragmatic approach, the less distinctive it is from the Socratic approach and the less it can be used to clarify Socratic debates. However, if we build *more* structure into the pragmatic approach, it will beg and obscure many of the crucial philosophical questions.

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Oxford University
UK

alexander.prescott-couch@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

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