

Out of the Fly-Bottle

*Genealogy, Power, and Normativity in the
Space of Reasons*

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For Isabel

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Reference Abbreviations

Works by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

- C* Marx, Karl. 2000. 'Capital'. In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- EPM_M* Marx, Karl. 2000. 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts'. In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- GI* Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 2000. 'The German Ideology'. In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- P* Marx, Karl. 2000. 'Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*'. In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Works by Ludwig Wittgenstein

- BB* Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *The Blue and Brown Books*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- OC* Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1969. *On Certainty*. Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Translated by Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- PI* Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2009. *Philosophical Investigations*. Edited by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. Revised 4th ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- PR_W* Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1975. *Philosophical Remarks*. Edited by Rush Rhees. Translated by Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- RFM* Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1978. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Edited by G. H. von Wright, Rush Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. 3rd ed. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Works by others

- EPM_S* Sellars, Wilfrid. 1997. *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Edited by Richard Rorty and Robert Brandom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- GM* Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2007. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson. Translated by Carol Diethe. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- KrV* Kant, Immanuel. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- PG* Hegel, G. W. F. 1977. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- PR_H* Hegel, G. W. F. 1991. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Edited by Allen W. Wood. Translated by H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- T* Hume, David. 1911. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. London, UK: J. M. Dent & Sons.

Philosophy ... leaves everything as it is.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *PI* §124

The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.

– Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*¹

¹ Marx, Karl. 2000a. 'Theses on Feuerbach'. In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 173.

Introduction

Consider the following familiar story. A child is preparing for her first day of high school. Having been raised in a devout Christian household, she believes in a monotheistic God, that the Earth was created in six days, and that Jesus Christ died on the Cross to atone for our sins. She regularly donates her pocket money to charity, tries her best to forgive the neighbourhood kids who are mean to her, and endeavours to love others as herself. Everyone in the child's social circle – her parents, neighbours, friends, etc. – are also devout Christians, so she believes that everyone believes and values as she does, and hence that her beliefs are true and her values valuable. Upon arriving at school, the child meets her new classmates. Among them is a child raised in a devout Hindu household. The Hindu child believes that Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the gods of creation, preservation, and destruction, that all existence is caught in a cycle of *samsāra*, and that we attain liberation from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth by achieving *mokṣa*. She heeds the advice of her elders in accordance with *dharma*, refrains from eating meat, and abhors the idea of ever hitting anyone (even when her little brother barges into her room without knocking). The Christian child, dumbfounded, asks her Hindu classmate where she learned all of this. She replies that she was taught it by her parents, neighbours, and friends who all believe and value as she does. Instead of simply dismissing her Hindu peer as mistaken, the Christian child reflects for a moment and comes to realise that she believes what she believes and values what she values as a result of the household she happens to have been born into, and that had she been born into her classmate's household, she would have believed and valued as she does. The Christian child returns home at the end of the day profoundly changed, her religious beliefs and values no longer holding the kind of sway over her life that they used to.

How ought we respond to this story? In one sense, there is nothing in it worthy of remark. That our beliefs and values vary with our cultural upbringings will come as no surprise, the fact that they

sometimes conflict simply a reflection of human diversity. In another sense, however, the fact that we often believe and value as we do on the basis of factors such as which household we happened to have been born into may strike us with a certain unease. For Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols, such an experience

can provoke a deep and disorienting existential crisis. For the discovery of religious diversity can prompt the thought that it's in some sense accidental that one happens to be raised in a Christian household rather than a Hindu household. This kind of arbitrariness can make the child wonder whether there's any reason to think that his [*sic*] religious beliefs are more likely to be right than those of the Hindu child. These matters are not peripheral – they strike to the heart of issues we care about most deeply.¹

As Knobe and Nichols continue, recognising the historical contingency of our beliefs, values, intuitions, practices, concepts, or institutions

can generate a crisis akin to that of the child confronted with religious diversity. If I find out that my philosophical intuitions [or whatever else] are a product of my cultural upbringing, then, since it's in some sense an accident that I had the cultural upbringing that I did, I am forced to wonder whether my intuitions are superior at tracking the nature of the world, the mind, and the good. ... And just as some Christian children come to think that there's no rational basis for preferring Christian to Hindu beliefs, we too might come to think that there's no rational basis for preferring [some] philosophical notions to [other] ones.²

The intuition obviously generalises. What reason do we have to endorse any aspect of our epistemic or ethical lives if it turns out that our believing them is but the accidental result of our historical situation? Indeed, the contingency of our beliefs and values seems to pose a potentially catastrophic problem for the rational status of all our beliefs and values.

Amia Srinivasan coins the term *genealogical anxiety* to refer to this experience of contingency-induced crisis. For her, genealogical anxiety is “the anxiety that the causal origins of our representations, once revealed, will somehow undermine, destabilise, or cast doubt on the legitimacy or standing of those representations”.³ As she vividly illustrates the issue:

¹ Knobe, Joshua, and Shaun Nichols. 2008. ‘An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto’. In *Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 11.

² Knobe and Nichols, 2008, 11.

³ Srinivasan, Amia. 2019. ‘Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking’. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119 (2): 128. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoz009>. See also Srinivasan, Amia. 2011. ‘Armchair v. Laboratory’. *London Review of Books*, 22 September 2011. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n18/amia-srinivasan/armchair-v.-laboratory>.

What reason do I have for thinking that my beliefs are true, or that my values are genuinely valuable, or that my concepts grasp the contours of reality, if I could so easily have held contrary beliefs or values, or cut up the world in terms of rival concepts? Naturally, my beliefs seem true to me; likewise, my values seem genuinely valuable, and my concepts seem genuinely apt. They are, after all, my beliefs, values and concepts. But would not my beliefs also have seemed true to me, my values valuable, and my concepts apt, even if they had been altogether different – if a different historical or cultural formation had endowed me with a world view radically unlike the one I in fact have? What am I to do with this other me, this shadow me, this me who believes the opposite of much of what I believe, who values what I disvalue, and who articulates the world in terms of concepts that are alien to my own? What if she is the right one, and I am the shadow?⁴

The experience of genealogical anxiety is, I take it, a normal feature of human life. Who has not speculated, perhaps with a sense of vertigo, about the kind of person they would have been in a close possible world or had the course of their life taken a different path? What would I have believed and valued had I been born into a different household in a different place at a different time? Would I have been the kind of person that I would, from the perspective of my actual beliefs and values, reflectively endorse? What does an answer to that question imply for the status of my actual beliefs and values or, indeed, for the kind of person I actually am? In raising these questions, genealogical anxiety sketches the outline of a research programme of central philosophical concern.

Whether or not genealogical anxiety is a genuine philosophical phenomenon seems uninterestingly undeniable. The interesting philosophical question is instead whether such a crisis of confidence in the rational bases of our beliefs and values is a *legitimate* response to the revelation of their contingency. For as Srinivasan notes, while the Christian child's recognition of religious diversity may as a matter of fact prompt her to question her beliefs and values, whether or not she "*ought* to experience such a crisis of faith" is another question entirely.⁵ One way of answering this question is to investigate whether or not the causal origins of our representations in fact undermine, destabilise, or cast doubt on their legitimacy or standing. Indeed, this is precisely the strategy pursued by many contributions to the literature.⁶ That is not, however,

⁴ Srinivasan, 2019, 128.

⁵ Srinivasan, Amia. 2015. 'The Archimedean Urge'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 29 (1): 327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12068>.

⁶ For contributions which are sceptical of the rational import of the causal histories of our representations, see, for instance, White, Roger. 2010. 'You Just Believe That Because...' *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (1): 573–615. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2010.00204.x>; Srinivasan, 2015; and Vavova, Katia. 2018. 'Irrelevant Influences'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96 (1): 134–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12297>. For an unambiguous defence of the idea that the causal histories of our representations *do* come to bear on their rational

the strategy I shall pursue over the course of this thesis. For as I shall show in Section 2.3.1, there are a number of cases in which the histories of our beliefs and values plainly do undermine their rational standing in ways we would entirely expect. Instead, I shall provide an answer to the question of whether one ought to be genealogically anxious *given that* the histories of one's beliefs and values seem to undermine their rational standing. This is one of the two axes around which my thesis revolves.

The other axis orienting my investigation is the connection between genealogical inquiry and social critique. For as it seems to me, the underlying problem from which genealogical anxiety emerges is the experience of a deep alienation from the forms of life into which we contingently find ourselves thrown, forms of life conditioned and delineated by the frequently subordinating institutions and forms of social organisation we happen to inhabit. Indeed, as we shall see in Chapter 4, I contend that the yearning for fixity expressed in the experience of genealogical anxiety is but an ideological manifestation of the subordinating social systems in which we move and the alienation with which we regard them. This means that if we are to answer the question of whether or not we ought to experience genealogical anxiety satisfactorily, then we must understand the inequities and oppressions structuring the social systems that give our lives determinate shape. At the same time, the fact that we find it intelligible to ask if we or one of our infinitely many genealogical doppelgängers is 'the right one' indicates that we are nevertheless alive to the possibility that our forms of life might be otherwise, the first step on the path towards the kind of social transformation capable of ameliorating our alienation – and hence of releasing us from genealogical anxiety's grip.

Genealogical inquiry and genealogical anxiety merit philosophical attention for four main reasons. Firstly, the genealogical contingency of our discursive lives raises a host of ethical and political issues central to what it is to live as a finite, contingent being among other finite, contingent beings. For just as the Christian child may question whether she has the right to judge the beliefs and values of her Hindu peer if the rational groundings of her own are undercut by their contingency, so might we think it unjustifiable to arbitrate between our beliefs and values and those of others, especially those constituted and acculturated in ways other than us. Addressing such issues is all the more important in modern multicultural societies

standing, see Leiter, Brian. 2023. 'On the Relevance of Etiology to Justification (with Reference to Marx and Nietzsche)'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 47: 157–69. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp202311244>.

given that the encounter with other belief and value systems is not an abstract philosophical question, but essential to determining how to live together.

Secondly, there is a deep connection between genealogical inquiry and foundational issues in the philosophy of language. As I shall argue in Section 1.4.3, while contemporary analyses have tended to view genealogical inquiry and genealogical anxiety through an epistemic lens, the strongest articulation of genealogical anxiety is to be found in Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox. Examining genealogical inquiry and genealogical anxiety duly raises fundamental questions in the theory of meaning regarding the metasemantics of natural language and the relation between discursive and practical activity. The contemporary literature has not only failed to appreciate this connection, but the epistemic paradigm dominant in it does not have the conceptual space to fully appreciate it. One of the ancillary objectives of this thesis is thus to highlight genealogical inquiry's linguistic assumptions and consequences.

Thirdly, insofar as the rule-following paradox can be understood as an articulation of genealogical anxiety, genealogical inquiry raises a profound puzzle about the nature of normativity. For if, as the rule-following paradox suggests, the norms of conduct against which we assess the correctness or incorrectness of a performance, either discursive or practical, are but the results of how we have been contingently trained to go on, then the very idea of normative fit, of a performance's accord and discord with a rule, becomes unintelligible. Genealogical inquiry thus raises the question of how normativity is possible at all. The thought that it may, in the final analysis, turn out not to be duly acts as one of genealogical anxiety's principal drivers.

And fourthly, genealogical inquiry enables us to move between what Wilfrid Sellars calls the "logical space of reasons" (*EPM*_S §36) and what we might complementarily call the logical space of law. To situate ourselves in the logical space of reasons is to be at home among the demands of normatively binding standards of correctness and acceptability, that is, as Sellars puts it, to view our discursive practices as part of the game "of justifying and being able to justify what one says" (*EPM*_S §36). To situate ourselves in the logical space of law, on the other hand, is to characterise our discursive lives according to a causal vocabulary in which our thoughts, goals, plans, and actions are but moments in a great network of causes and effects extending back through history and indefinitely into the future. By bringing the causal histories of our normative lives to bear on their rational status, genealogical inquiry is uniquely positioned to make sense of the fact that we are participants in both orders of explanation.

Despite the worries raised by the contingency of our discursive practices, the overarching objective of this thesis is not to *resolve* our genealogical anxiety by showing it to be unjustified or unwarranted. Instead, my objective is to *dissolve* genealogical anxiety as a problem requiring solution in the first place. Indeed, as Sellars argues, it is only by understanding why the defenders of a mistaken theory “have been led to speak as they do” that we can achieve philosophical progress for unless “the root confusion” is exorcised, even if the theory has been “abandoned, at least as an overt article of faith”, it will “find[...] other ways of making its presence felt”.⁷ This means that instead of simply showing genealogical anxiety to be, as Sellars continues, “inconsistent or incompatible with the incontrovertible”, I aim to identify and expose the initial confusion which leads us to adopt what John McDowell calls the “frame of mind” from which it arises.⁸

The overarching argument I present in order to achieve this objective is that genealogical anxiety is not a philosophical problem at all, but a *social* one. I contend that genealogical anxiety is ultimately an expression of the pathologies structuring our social systems and reflected in our discursive practices. This is because the thoroughgoing entwinement of our practical and discursive activities means that the material structures of society that condition our possibilities for action also condition our possibilities of thought. As such, if that material structure presents itself in such a way that it appears as given prior to human agency, then the conditions of thought will appear similarly given, an appearance that the reality of genealogical contingency cannot but undercut. I thus argue that genealogical anxiety is an expression of the tension between the illusory expectation of necessity and the contingency we actually find in our normative lives. This means that the experience of genealogical anxiety is a legitimate response to that tension and that it shall remain intractable until the tension is ameliorated.

My thesis comprises five chapters. In Chapter 1, I elucidate genealogical inquiry’s central characteristics and explicate the different ways in which we commonly experience genealogical anxiety. I argue that genealogical inquiry is distinguished as a form of philosophical methodology by its historicism, its deployment of higher-order evidence, and its naturalism. I then argue that each of these three features generate a specific ‘flavour’ of genealogical anxiety, namely anxiety about the prospect of cultural relativism, of epistemological

⁷ Sellars, Wilfrid. 1952. ‘Particulars’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 13 (2): 184. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2103871>.

⁸ Sellars, 1952, 184 and McDowell, John. 1996. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. xxiii-xxiv.

scepticism, and of normative nihilism. These are, as I see it, the three main ways that genealogical anxiety is expressed in the literature. While each form of genealogical anxiety is consequential enough to motivate us to grant it our philosophical attention, I go on to argue that its manifestation as a worry about the prospect of normative nihilism ought to be addressed with the most urgency since the argument from which it arises, the rule-following paradox, threatens to render normativity impossible. This establishes a connection between genealogy and foundational issues in the theory of meaning which has thus far gone undertheorised.

In Chapter 2, I develop a novel typology of genealogical inquiry in response to two objections to its cogency: the genetic fallacy objection and the self-defeat objection. Instead of the two or three typically identified in the literature, I identify four families of genealogical inquiry – what I call debunking, vindicatory, problematising, and rationalising genealogies – organised along two axes of analysis. By employing a finer-toothed comb than others in the literature, my typology enables us to apprehend the diversity of genealogical inquiry, the argumentative objectives they each pursue, and their critical potential. Discriminating between the different forms of genealogical inquiry also serves to restrict the scope of my thesis more precisely than would otherwise be possible.

In Chapter 3, I address the question of whether we ought to be genealogically anxious by analysing the picture of language on which the rule-following paradox depends. I argue that the rule-following paradox – and the form of genealogical anxiety to which it leads – arises from the assumption of a two-stage metasemantic strategy, a model of discursive practice that fundamentally distorts the idea of linguistic competence. I then reconstruct what I see as the most interesting and promising response to this problem: Robert Brandom's sophisticated, intertwined, neo-Hegelian accounts of the social-recognitive institution of normative authority and the historical-recollective determination of conceptual content. I argue that Brandom is partially successful in reconciling us to the contingency of our normative lives since, as he contends, it is the very contingency of our discursive practices which makes them determinately contentful.

The transition between Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 marks a significant shift of philosophical posture in my thesis. For although the question of whether or not we ought to be genealogically anxious is of vital importance, it leaves unexamined the issue of why we are wont to adopt the two-stage model of discursive practice which leads us up this philosophical garden path in the first place. My concern from Chapter 4 onwards thus has to do with genealogical anxiety's conditions of possibility. What, in other words, do we have to assume about discursive normativity to make sense of the idea that the history of our own discursive

practice strikes us as a source of anxiety? Whereas asking whether we ought to be genealogically anxious is to engage with the issue *analytically*, approaching it in this manner is to engage with it *diagnostically*.

After motivating the transition between the analytic and diagnostic components of my argument, I argue in Chapter 4 that the two-stage metasemantic strategy from which genealogical anxiety emerges becomes a viable philosophical option only under ideological discursive conditions, and hence only under oppressive social conditions. This is because if two-stage metasemantic strategies are to be considered even remotely plausible, we must treat the social and historical processes in which our discursive practices are embedded as given, the paradigm case of ideological obfuscation. Since understanding the ideological conditions in which two-stage metasemantic strategies (and hence genealogical anxiety) arise requires that we understand the social conditions with which they are correlated, I thus develop a three-tiered analysis of socio-discursive oppression sensitive to the realities of oppression and inequality. I then evaluate Brandom's account against this three-tiered analysis. I argue that while Brandom's argument can partially account for what I call first-order oppressions, it does not address the dynamics of second-order oppressions and, worse yet, *cannot* account for third-order oppressions. I conclude by arguing that properly addressing the social and historical dynamics of second- and third-order oppressions requires that we attend to the forms of intelligibility made available to us by historically subjugated discursive formations.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I argue that given this connection to ideology, genealogical anxiety ought to be understood as a distinctive form of normative alienation. I argue that the Kantian metaphysics of normativity appropriate to modernity creates a double bind according to which a raft of norms contingently governing our discursive practices are structurally reticent to the kind of reflective endorsement required to institute their normatively binding necessity. I then argue that being subject to norms one does not endorse is what characterises normative alienation, the analysis of which demands that we concretise Brandom's conception of discursive normativity as Marx concretises Hegel's. Lastly, I argue that making good on this injunction means that we must view genealogical anxiety not as a philosophical problem, but as the discursive manifestation of the social pathologies lacing society. This thereby dissolves genealogical anxiety as a problem requiring merely philosophical solution.

1 Who's Afraid of Friedrich Nietzsche?

Genealogy, Higher-Order Evidence, and Rule-Following

1.1 Introduction

The aetiologies of our beliefs seem, in at least some cases, to come to bear on the reasons we have for endorsing them.¹ In some cases, those aetiologies will serve to reinforce our confidence in them by exhibiting their relations to the facts of the matter or by making clear the roles they play in achieving our reflectively endorsed ends. Indeed, the fact that my belief that I am sitting at my desk as I write this sentence is caused by the fact that I am sitting at my desk is good reason to think that it is true. In others, they may undermine our confidence by revealing our beliefs to be sensitive to epistemically or pragmatically irrelevant forces, or because it is just one among many possible ways of organising our epistemic lives and practical projects. Yet in both cases we may find ourselves experiencing a distinctive kind of philosophical unease. For whether or not one *ought* to endorse a belief is a matter of, among other things, the reasons standing for or against it, its assertability or acceptability conditions, and what the world is like. One thing that does *not* come to bear on the matter, however, is its history. I believe that the gravitational force between two objects travelling at non-relativistic velocities is proportional to their respective masses and the square of the distance between them not because I happened to study physics at school, but because of the weight of evidence in its favour. True, I wouldn't have *come to believe* in the truth of Newton's universal law of gravitation unless I had been to school and unless I had studied physics, but I do not believe it simply *because* I went to school. I believe it because of the reasons standing in its favour: the (defeasibly) warranted

¹ The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for our concepts and practices which we shall examine in Chapters 2 and 3. For the sake of simplicity however, I shall focus on the aetiology of belief for now unless otherwise specified.

epistemic authority of the scientists who gathered the data to confirm Newton's law experimentally, of the authors of the school curriculum, and of my physics teacher. If, then, it turns out that the histories of our beliefs, concepts, and practices do, as a matter of fact, impact the beliefs, concepts, and practices we endorse, then it appears that something, somewhere, has gone awry.

One way we might articulate the philosophical puzzle at stake is by noting, as Bernard Williams does, that belief "aims at truth", that it is, as he puts it elsewhere, "subject to norms of truth".² One's beliefs ought to be responsive to the truth of the propositions they express because their truth is the standard by which they are judged. The truth of Williams' contention can be seen both by noting that we ought to give up beliefs upon discovering their falsity and that attempts to aim belief at something other than truth simply end in nonsense. Indeed, G. E. Moore – reflecting on his conversations with Wittgenstein – remarks that "it's perfectly absurd or nonsensical to say such things as 'I don't believe it's raining, but as a matter of fact it is'".³ By contrast, since truth is but a function of the meanings of our terms and what the world is like, this means that a belief's history has nothing to do with the matter and is hence strictly excluded as a criterion for its assessment. The correctness of my belief that Newton's law of gravitation relates the masses of distinct objects to the distance between them has nothing to do with the circumstances by which I came to believe it, but simply with whether or not it is the case.⁴ Once again, the history of the belief seems irrelevant.

It thus might strike one as quite strange that some experience anxiety in response to recognising the historical contingency of our beliefs. For one, the aetiology of a belief appears to be utterly irrelevant to its correctness. For another, the fact that our beliefs vary with historical contingency is a perfectly unmysterious phenomenon in most normal cases. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that our beliefs usually vary with matters of fact which indicates that they are appropriately sensitive to the way the world is, that all is

² Williams, Bernard. 1973. 'Deciding to Believe'. In *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956–1972*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 136. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511621253> and Williams, Bernard. 2002a. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 67.

³ Moore, G. E. 1993. 'Moore's Paradox'. In *G. E. Moore: Selected Writings*, edited by Thomas Baldwin. London, UK: Routledge. 207. Strictly speaking, Moore talks about the absurdity of *asserting* such sentences, not *believing* them. It nevertheless seems to me that it would be just as absurd to believe that one believes that it is not raining and that as a matter of fact it is. The truth norm of belief can also be made visible by the apparent redundancy of qualifying the second conjunct of the nonsense clause with 'as a matter of fact'. Cf. *PI* II 190.

⁴ As we shall see in Section 2.2, whether I am *justified* in believing something may indeed require determining if I arrived at the belief under appropriate circumstances. If I formed true beliefs about the laws of gravity on the basis of a dream I had about falling apples I would not be justified in believing them. But justification is a quite different issue to correctness for which aetiology is an irrelevant consideration.

well epistemically. Had it been sunny today, I would have believed it to be sunny. Had the gravitational attraction between two objects been proportional to their masses and the *cube* of the distance between them, I would have believed it so (assuming, of course, that Newton, and all those transmitting his discovery to the physics students of the world, were also sensitive to the fact). Indeed, as Timothy Williamson notes, it is precisely the fact that our epistemic states are related to the world in such a way that the contingency of the latter is reflected in the former which institutes the conditions for the felicitous adaptation of world to mind in action and mind to world in knowledge.⁵ So why, we can ask again, might some find it anxiety-inducing to think that our beliefs are just as contingent as the historical circumstances in which they figure?

As I see it, there are three reasons one might find the results of genealogical investigation anxiety-inducing. Those reasons are correlated with three ways by which we might conceptualise genealogical inquiry, each of which is in turn distinguished by which of genealogical inquiry's three characteristic features is taken to be of primary importance. Those characteristics are genealogy's 1) *historicism*, 2) account of the *relationship between higher-order evidence and epistemic justification*, and 3) *naturalism*.⁶ Depending on which feature one foregrounds, genealogical inquiry will be understood to give rise to one of three major worries: a) *cultural relativism*, b) *epistemological scepticism*, and c) *normative nihilism*. These worries delineate three distinct 'flavours' of genealogical anxiety, each of which expresses a philosophical quandary about progressively less tractable threats to progressively more foundational aspects of our discursive activity. As we shall see, while 1) and a), and 2) and b) have received the better part of genealogy's recent philosophical attention, 3) and c) are in fact its most fundamental and problematic elements as the connection between genealogy's naturalism and the threat of normative nihilism it raises strikes at the heart of a very general way of thinking about the structure of discursive normativity. Even so, that connection has been overlooked. This is why genealogical anxiety cannot be dismissed so quickly.

⁵ Williamson, Timothy. 2000. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 1.

⁶ These three characteristics should not be thought of as a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for an argument to count as a genealogy, but as a set of properties bound by family resemblance relations that many, but not necessarily all, genealogies share. This is, moreover, by no means an exhaustive list. Other significant features of genealogical inquiry include the way it encourages metaconceptual reflection, its frequent use as a tool to investigate historical processes of subjectivation, and its aptitude as a form of social critique. While we shall examine these elements of genealogy in due course in greater or lesser detail, the features we shall examine across Sections 1.2-1.4 are simply among the most relevant for making sense of genealogical anxiety specifically while providing sufficient resources to distinguish genealogy from other philosophical methodologies.

Finally, it is important to note that my aim in examining the connections genealogical inquiry's characteristic features and the problems they raise is not to show that genealogical anxiety is justified, that we *ought* to experience genealogical anxiety, but rather that genealogical anxiety is a *legitimate* response to hold towards our epistemic and discursive practices. The idea is not that we experience genealogical anxiety because cultural relativism, epistemological scepticism, or normative nihilism are true, but because in a close possible world they might be.

1.2 Historicism and Cultural Relativism

1.2.1 History, General and Specific

Getting a grip on the idea of genealogical anxiety demands that we examine the circumstances in which we typically experience it. This is because, as Stanley Cavell puts it, “the profoundest as well as the most superficial questions can be understood only when they have been placed in their natural environments”.⁷ As the analogy of the Christian child encountering religious diversity epitomises, genealogical anxiety's natural environment – the context in which it most readily strikes us upon leaving the armchair – is, as Matthieu Queloz puts it, the “confrontation[...] with alternative ways of thinking” in the rough-and-tumble of history.⁸ This is why genealogical inquiry's first and most obvious distinguishing feature is its *historicism* – as close to a necessary condition for an inquiry to count as a genealogy as there is – and the problem it is most commonly understood to raise is that of *cultural relativism*.

Some may immediately object that history has no place in philosophy and hence that genealogical inquiry is not ‘really’ philosophy at all. Many who draw on history in their philosophical practice will recognise the sentiment. Williams, for instance, recounts the story of a (presumably Reaganite) American philosopher who placed a sign that read “Just say NO to the history of philosophy” on the door to his office.⁹ The anti-historicists claim that history can at most tell us sociological facts about how people have

⁷ Cavell, Stanley. 2015. ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ In *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 38. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316286616>.

⁸ Queloz, Matthieu. 2025. *The Ethics of Conceptualisation: Tailoring Thought and Language to Need*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 91.

⁹ Williams, Bernard. 2002b. ‘Why Philosophy Needs History’. *London Review of Books*, 17 October 2002. <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v24/n20/bernard-williams/why-philosophy-needs-history>. For a contemporary articulation of this kind of suspicion towards history in philosophy, see Fricker, Miranda. 2016. ‘What’s the Point of Blame? A Paradigm Based Explanation’. *Noûs* 50 (1): 165–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12067>.

understood things, not how we *ought* to understand things, and is hence at best a philosophical amusement, at worst a narcotic.

We can simply ignore those positions which depend on a substantive conception of what counts as 'real' philosophy – as if what philosophy is were a settled question. However, simply declaring that history should be permitted into the hallowed circle of legitimate philosophy does not suffice as an account of genealogy's historicism either. In this respect, Alexander Nehamas' claim that "genealogy simply *is* history, correctly practiced" seems to cast too wide a net.¹⁰ It would be implausible to suggest, for instance, that Carl von Clausewitz's excursus on the origins and outcomes of the Napoleonic Wars, E. P. Thompson's examination of the formation of the working class in England, or Ellen Meiksins Wood's study of agrarian capitalism are instances of history practiced incorrectly, yet we would nevertheless be hesitant to consider them instances of genealogical inquiry.¹¹ What matters for genealogy is hence not its historicism *simpliciter*, but the specific way that genealogy *leverages* history in philosophical explanation.

Williams duly presents a more modest account of genealogy's historicism. For Williams, "a genealogy is a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about".¹² On this understanding, a genealogy is a philosophical explanation which attempts to explain some feature of human life and culture in terms of its history, origin, or process of development, real or imagined.¹³ A paradigmatic instance of

¹⁰ Nehamas, Alexander. 1985. *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 246n1.

¹¹ See Clausewitz, Carl von. 1989. *On War*. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; Thompson, E. P. 2013. *The Making of the English Working Class*. London, UK: Penguin Books; and Wood, Ellen Meiksins. 2017. *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View*. London, UK: Verso.

¹² Williams, 2002a, 20.

¹³ It may at first appear odd to suggest that genealogical inquiry can rely on imagined histories given that the purpose of undertaking historically-informed philosophical inquiry in the first place is to make visible how we *actually* came to talk, think, and act as we talk, think, and act. Indeed, we can surely explain anything we might care to on the basis of historical speculation. In order to understand the philosophical value of such imagined histories, we can turn to state of nature arguments. As Matthieu Queloz articulates it, state of nature arguments "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". By modelling how some element of human culture came to be as it is (or might have been otherwise) given a stipulated set of very general social, environmental, and psychological conditions, we can then tweak things to better understand how the phenomenon in question functions under different conditions and hence better understand how it functions under actually obtaining conditions. A genealogy which makes use of a state of nature story thus need not be faithful to historical fact because state of nature arguments are, as Rousseau himself puts it, "better suited to elucidate the Nature of things than to show their genuine origins". Queloz, Matthieu. 2021. *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 6 and Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 2019. *Rousseau: The Discourses and Other Early Political Writings*. Translated by Victor Gourevitch. 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 132.

genealogical explanation is thus psychoanalysis since it seeks to explain one's behaviour, psychological propensities, desires, and aversions in terms of one's personal history: one's experience of childhood trauma, process of sexual development, receipt (or lack) of parental affection, resolution of the Family Romance, etc.. So too is the traditional account of ideology as false consciousness which contends that we hold false beliefs about the nature of society and its possible modes of organisation in virtue of the history of our relationship to the dominant mode of production.¹⁴

Even if we adopt a permissive attitude towards it, it is important to note that there is a form of historicism that is rightly to be treated with suspicion. Karl Popper, for instance, argues that historicism

sees the individual as a pawn, as a rather insignificant instrument in the general development of mankind. And the really important actors on the Stage of History he may find, perhaps, in the Great Nations and their Great Leaders, or perhaps in the Great Classes, or in the Great Ideas. However this may be, he will try to understand the meaning of the play which is performed on that Stage; he will try to understand the laws of historical development. If he succeeds in this, he will, of course, be able to predict future developments. He might then put politics upon a solid basis, and give us practical advice by telling us which political actions are likely to succeed or likely to fail.¹⁵

Popper sees in the historicist's avowed ability to predict future developments the secular remnants of a theistic "doctrine of the chosen people" on whose back the edifice of "developmental laws whose discovery would enable us to prophesy the destiny of man" may be erected.¹⁶ The risk that such teleological reasoning may be used to justify paternalistically shepherding those ignorant of their putative destinies in directions against their will is obvious.

Despite his legitimate suspicion of the pursuit of historical origins, Popper nevertheless overgeneralises his conclusions by mistaking the dangers of a particular mode of historicism for the dangers of historicism *tout court*. For it is clear that Popper assumes that historicism in philosophy can take no form

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the theory of ideology in historical context, see Rosen, Michael. 1996. *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press and Eagleton, Terry. 1991. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London, UK: Verso.

¹⁵ Popper, Karl. 1945. *The Open Society and Its Enemies. Vol. 1: The Spell of Plato*. 2 vols. London, UK: George Routledge & Sons. 4-5. See also Popper, Karl. 1999. *The Poverty of Historicism*. London, UK: Routledge.

¹⁶ Popper, 1945, 6. Cf. Derrida, Jacques. 1992. 'Before the Law'. In *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge. New York, NY: Routledge and Butler, Judith. 2006. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge. xiv-xv. For further discussion of this theme, see Ratcliffe, Julian. 2018. 'Beyond Ideology: Marx, Critique, and the Production of Social Reality'. MPhilStud Thesis. Department of Philosophy, King's College London. 45-6.

other than the teleological historicism undoubtedly familiar to those acquainted with the cruder readings of Marx and Hegel.¹⁷ But this is by no means unavoidable. Indeed, genealogy's model of historicism should be considered a direct rebuke to a naïvely mechanistic conception of history insofar as it seeks instead to resist the force of Grand Historical Narratives.¹⁸ It is, after all, none other than Michel Foucault who states that “genealogy ... rejects the metahistorical deployment of ideal significations and indefinite teleologies. It opposes itself to the search for ‘origins’”.¹⁹

If not invested in the search for origins precisely out of a concern to avoid the totalitarianism of its accompanying Grand Narratives, how should genealogy's historicism be characterised?²⁰ Is the identification of origins not the very purpose for which historical explanation is invoked? What other possible purpose could it serve? Foucault argues that genealogical inquiry is governed by “a principle of heterogeneity” intended to highlight how things develop according to the unforeseen and unforeseeable twists and turns of history.²¹ Since, as he states elsewhere, “genealogy ... record[s] the *singularity* of the events outside of any monotonous finality [my emphasis]”, this means that genealogical inquiry ought to be understood as a way of “cultivat[ing] the details and accidents that accompany every beginning”.²² It is

¹⁷ Importantly, whether we impute a teleological narrative or an emphasis on specificity to a given historical analysis is not a matter of understanding a course of events correctly or incorrectly, but of how we describe it relative to a given argumentative purpose. Even *prima facie* teleological historicists such as Marx can be read through the lens of specificity. For one such example, see Allen, Amy. 2022. ‘Dripping with Blood and Dirt from Head to Toe: Marx’s Genealogy of Capitalism in *Capital*, Volume 1’. *The Monist* 105 (4): 470–86. <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onac012>. Cf. Wiggershaus, Rolf. 2001. ‘The Frankfurt School’s “Nietzschean Moment”’. *Constellations* 8 (1): 144–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00221> and Owen, David. 2019. ‘Nietzsche and the Frankfurt School’. In *The Routledge Companion to the Frankfurt School*, edited by Peter E. Gordon, Epsen Hammer, and Axel Honneth. New York, NY: Routledge.

¹⁸ An exemplar of such a Grand Narrative is Thomas Carlyle’s conception of history according to which the analysis of what humanity has achieved on Earth is the “History of the Great Men who have worked here”. Carlyle, Thomas. 2013. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Edited by David R. Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 21.

¹⁹ Foucault, Michel. 1984a. ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’. In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 77. Similarly, Raymond Geuss states that “genealogy doesn’t characteristically discover a single origin for the object of its investigation”. Geuss, Raymond. 1994. ‘Nietzsche and Genealogy’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 2 (3): 276. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.1994.tb00015.x>.

²⁰ For a previous explication of the relationship between genealogy and history, see Saar, Martin. 2008. ‘Understanding Genealogy: History, Power, and the Self’. *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 2 (3): 295–314. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187226308X335976>.

²¹ Foucault, Michel. 2003. “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey. New York, NY: Picador. 69. See also Queloz, 2021, 174-5 and Williams, 2002a, 40 and 173 for an account of how genealogical inquiry charts what Queloz calls the “autonomous elaboration” of its target.

²² Foucault, 1984a, 76 and 80.

precisely Foucault's pursuit of this objective across his oeuvre which explains the lengths he goes to to develop what he calls a "micro-physics" of power, ethics, and knowledge.²³ In contrast to Popper's teleological historicism, this means that genealogical historicism is distinguished by its fastidious *specificity*.²⁴

How, then, should we understand this drive for specificity in historical analysis? Foucault states that genealogical inquiry should not be understood as "a matter of some form ... of scientism that disqualifies speculation by contrasting it with the rigour of well-established bodies of knowledge", nor is it motivated by the allure of "empiricism".²⁵ Indeed, Foucault's own Nietzschean historicism is adopted specifically to counterpose Louis Althusser's attempt to grant Marxism the status of a science and whose deliverances would subsequently take on the status of statements of fact.²⁶ Rather, as Foucault puts it, genealogical inquiry reveals things to be "an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogenous layers" that "disturbs what was previously considered immobile; ... fragments what was thought unified; ... [and] shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself".²⁷ Indeed, as Friedrich Nietzsche puts it, "hitherto one has generally trusted one's concepts as if they were a wonderful dowry from some sort of wonderland: but they are, after all, the inheritance from our most remote, most foolish as well as most intelligent ancestors".²⁸ It is precisely because cultural formations such as morality exhibit what Alexander Prescott-Couch calls a kind of internal "disunity" or "fragmentation" that they fail, under genealogical scrutiny, to evince the interpretative coherence required by "those who take a certain kind of *unity* of our life to be ... of crucial normative importance".²⁹

²³ Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. 2nd ed. London, UK: Vintage Books. 29.

²⁴ For an interesting articulation of the philosophical uses to which these two conceptions of historicism can be put, see Deleuze, Gilles. 2005. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson. London, UK: Continuum. 75-8.

²⁵ Foucault, 2003, 9.

²⁶ See Foucault, 2003, 9-10.

²⁷ Foucault, 1984a, 82. See also Raymond Geuss' analysis of Nietzsche's conception of history at *GM* II:12-3: "History, for Nietzsche, is just a sequence of contingent conjunctions, accidental encounters, and fortuitous collisions, not the story of the unitary development or self-expression of some single underlying, non-empirical agency". Geuss, Raymond. 1997. 'Nietzsche and Morality'. *European Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1): 10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0378.00024>. Following Foucault, Queloz similarly develops what he calls a "kaleidoscopic picture" of concepts that stands in marked contrast to a vision of our conceptual frameworks that emphasises their overarching unity. See Queloz, 2025, 132-4.

²⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967. *The Will to Power*. Edited by Walter Kaufmann. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York, NY: Vintage Books. §409.

²⁹ Prescott-Couch, Alexander. 2024. 'Nietzsche and the Significance of Genealogy'. *Mind* 133 (531): 639. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzae008>. For analyses of genealogy which centre what Prescott-Couch calls its deconstructive, "counter-reconciliatory" content, see also Prescott-Couch, Alexander. 2014. 'Williams and Nietzsche

The significance of the specificity of genealogy's historicism is articulated by Catarina Dutilh Novaes. For as she argues, the layers of meaning deposited over history constitute “presuppositions that then become uncritically accepted”, the assumed background from which inquiry proceeds.³⁰ As she continues,

it is of the utmost importance for the philosopher to be aware of the stratified nature of philosophical concepts [because] ... neglecting this dimension leads to the uncritical assimilation of presuppositions and substantive theoretical choices made along the way in the shaping of a concept, which then come to be viewed as truisms. These are often described as one's absolute ‘intuitions’ about concept X, when in fact they are the products of theoretical choices made (by others) along the way. It is by exposing and investigating these different layers of meaning that the philosopher is able to isolate the theoretical choices that led to the particular shaping of a given philosophical concept over time.³¹

It is in this respect that Colin Koopman argues, in comments echoed by Bonnie Sheehy, Amy Allen, Sally Haslanger, and Dutilh Novaes herself, that genealogy's historicism consists in its ability to identify the distinction between the “*that* and the *how*” of historical contingency, between “showing *that* the present is contingent and showing *how* the present is contingently made up”.³² It is this distinction which articulates the way that genealogy brings to our awareness both the specific historical processes and pressures funnelling things down certain developmental paths rather than others, and the paths untaken which would have led towards quite different historical presents. As Allen notes, such attention to the historically specific

on the Significance of History for Moral Philosophy’. *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 45 (2): 147–68. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.45.2.0147>; Prescott-Couch, Alexander. 2015. ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, and Historical Individuals’. *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 46 (1): 99–109. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jnietstud.46.1.0099>; and Prescott-Couch, Alexander. Forthcoming. ‘Nietzschean Genealogy and Philosophical Methodology’. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. Cf. Queloz, Matthieu, and Damian Cueni. 2021. ‘Left Wittgensteinianism’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 29 (4): 764–5. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12603>.

³⁰ Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2015. ‘Conceptual Genealogy for Analytic Philosophy’. In *Beyond the Analytic-Continental Divide: Pluralist Philosophy in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Jeffrey A. Bell, Andrew Cutrofello, and Paul M. Livingston. New York, NY: Routledge. 85.

³¹ Dutilh Novaes, 2015, 85.

³² Koopman, Colin. 2013. *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 21. See also Allen, Amy. 2010. ‘The Entanglement of Power and Validity: Foucault and Critical Theory’. In *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O’Leary and Christopher Falzon. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. 85–93; Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2020a. ‘Carnap Meets Foucault: Conceptual Engineering and Genealogical Investigations’. *Inquiry*, 14–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1860122>; Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2023a. ‘Should We Be Genealogically Anxious? From Anxiety to Epistemic Agency and Critical Resistance’. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 47: 126. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp2023103142>; Haslanger, Sally. 2005. ‘What Are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds’. *Hypatia* 20 (4): 13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00533.x>; and Sheehy, Bonnie. 2020. ‘Reparative Critique, Care, and the Normativity of Foucauldian Genealogy’. *Angelaki* 25 (5): 72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2020.1807142>.

is also what primes genealogical inquiry for use as a tool of critique insofar as it aims to show that its target “is made up of contingent practices with a specific history, enabling us to see *that* it can be changed, and how it has been constituted, enabling us to see *how* it can be changed”.³³ It is in this respect that genealogical inquiry explicates not just how and why we developed *a* belief, concept, or practice, but how and why *we* developed *our* beliefs, concepts, and practices.

1.2.2 Cultural Relativism

In light of genealogy’s historicism, the first problem to which the revelation of genealogical contingency might be thought to lead is a kind of insurmountable *cultural relativism*. For in bringing to our awareness how different people at different times have thought and lived, we may come to think that there is no way of evaluating between them and hence no reason to prefer any one way of thinking or living over any other.³⁴

The suggestion that our beliefs are the result of contingent cultural forces has been a topic of concern throughout the history of philosophy. John Stuart Mill, for instance, bemoans the fact that few are “shaken by his [*sic*] being aware that other ages, countries, sects, churches, classes, and parties have thought, and even now think, the exact reverse”, nor are many “trouble[d] ... that the same causes which make him a Churchman in London, would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Pekin”.³⁵ Likewise, John Rawls notes that “to some extent (how great we cannot tell) the way we assess evidence and weigh moral and political values is shaped by our total experience, our whole course of life up to now; and our total experiences must always differ”.³⁶ With some elements of our total experience the result of historical forces that are simply irrelevant to matters of assessment, that they do exert such influence over our modes of assessment may strike one as a source of anxiety. More recently, Joshua DiPaolo and Robert Mark Simpson have defended an account of what they call “indoctrination anxiety” as a means of articulating the worry that we believe what we do just because of totalising community pressures beyond which we cannot see.³⁷

³³ Allen, 2010, 87. A paradigm example of critique that centres the ‘how’ of history is what Stuart Hall’s calls “conjunctural analysis”. See Hall, Stuart, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts. 2013. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Red Globe Press.

³⁴ This is sometimes referred to as the *diversity argument* for genealogical anxiety.

³⁵ Mill, John Stuart. 2003. *On Liberty*. Edited by David Bromwich and George Kateb. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 88.

³⁶ Rawls, John. 2005. *Political Liberalism*. Expanded edition. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 56-7.

³⁷ See DiPaolo, Joshua, and Robert Mark Simpson. 2015. ‘Indoctrination Anxiety and the Etiology of Belief’. *Synthese* 193 (10): 3079–98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-015-0919-6>.

Alex Worsnip's related observation that people sometimes hold "suspiciously convenient beliefs" – as when, for example, the putatively impartial judgements of a conservative judge just so happen to consistently align with conservative values – is usually a good indication that one has indeed succumbed to those pressures.³⁸ Continuing this theme, C. Thi Nguyen goes so far as to claim that "the true sceptical problem of our era is not, 'How do I know that I'm not dreaming?', but 'How do I know I've picked the right groups to trust?'".³⁹

Why, then, might we think that genealogical inquiry leads to cultural relativism? Richard Rorty articulates the underlying idea in his discussion of cultural "vocabularies".⁴⁰ For Rorty, vocabularies are more or less stable, coherent, and expansive hermeneutical frameworks through which we make sense of the world, each other, and ourselves. They comprise the terms in and through which we describe reality. We can – and often do – speak with multiple vocabularies, switching from one to the other as the need arises. Central among the vocabularies we employ stands what Rorty calls our "final vocabulary", the vocabulary in whose defence we have "no noncircular argumentative recourse".⁴¹ Our final vocabularies give public shape to the point at which, as Ludwig Wittgenstein articulates it, "explanations come to an end" (*PI* §1).⁴²

The threat of cultural relativism arises upon recognising that it is not at all clear if or how it is possible to assess the relative merits of different vocabularies, especially different final vocabularies. For while there is a relatively unproblematic sense in which individual propositions are true or false independently of what we think about the states of affairs they are about, Rorty points out that it doesn't make sense to think of the appropriateness of the vocabularies in which those propositions are formulated as similarly independent of the very terms through which they are evaluated. As Rorty puts it, in most normal cases "we ... let the world decide the competition between alternative sentences" in the sense that the way the world is, i.e., the obtaining of mind-independent states of affairs, determines which propositions are true and which false.⁴³ The world does not, however, decide between competing vocabularies for the simple

³⁸ Worsnip, Alex. 2023. 'Suspiciously Convenient Beliefs and the Pathologies of (Epistemological) Ideal Theory'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 47: 237-8. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp2023111449>.

³⁹ Nguyen, C. Thi. 2023. 'Hostile Epistemology'. *Social Philosophy Today* 39: 1. <https://doi.org/10.5840/socphiltoday2023391>.

⁴⁰ See Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Esp. Ch. 1: The Contingency of Language and Ch. 4: Private Irony and Liberal Hope.

⁴¹ Rorty, 1989, 73.

⁴² See also §§211 and 217.

⁴³ Rorty, 1989, 5.

reason that the propositional items capable of being assigned a truth-value are individuated in terms of the vocabularies through which they are described. Indeed, while the propositions articulated in terms of a particular vocabulary might be true or false, it is not at all clear what sense it makes to say that the vocabulary itself is true or false.

Rorty goes on to liken final vocabularies to “tools” insofar as the assessment of whether or not a particular tool is the right one for some task is to be answered relative to the purposes exhibited in embarking on the project for which it is called, a question amenable to answers such as ‘efficient’ or ‘inefficient’, not ‘true’ or ‘false’.⁴⁴ The problem with this picture, as Rorty himself acknowledges, is that “*languages* are made not found”.⁴⁵ Indeed, while “the craftsman typically knows what job he [*sic*] needs to do before picking or inventing tools with which to do it”, the agent selecting between vocabularies “is typically unable to make clear exactly what it is that he wants to do before developing the language [i.e., vocabulary] in which he succeeds in doing it. His [*sic*] new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose”.⁴⁶ But as we’ve just seen, it is those very purposes which serve as the standards of appropriateness against which our vocabularies are to be assessed in much the same way, as Donald Davidson explains, that an action is successful just in case it advances our ends and unsuccessful if it does not.⁴⁷ If it turns out that we are unable to formulate our purposes except within the terms of the vocabulary in question, then any workable notion of appropriateness becomes untenable. This means that it not only becomes difficult to arbitrate between competing claims, but that the very nature of cultural vocabularies precludes access to any notion of normative fit against which they could be assessed.

The specifically genealogical worry one might identify in this picture arises when we consider that the vocabularies we use are in large part the products of the contingent historical processes – our upbringings, cultural environments, and historical locations – into which we find ourselves thrown. Just as the Christian child may think that she would have used a different vocabulary to navigate and make sense

⁴⁴ Rorty, 1989, 11-2.

⁴⁵ Rorty, 1989, 7.

⁴⁶ Rorty, 1989, 12-3. Some, such as Nietzsche and Sartre, take the demand to create our own vocabularies, either individual or communal, to be the very condition of our freedom, a demand that only the strong of will are capable of facing while others must resort to bad faith to avoid. Cf. Rorty’s discussion of how Proust, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida conceptualise this injunction to self-constitution in Rorty, 1989, Ch. 5: Self-Creation and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger and Ch. 6: From Ironist Theory to Private Allusions: Derrida.

⁴⁷ See Davidson, Donald. 1963. ‘Actions, Reasons, and Causes’. *The Journal of Philosophy* 60 (23): 689-90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2023177>.

of the world had she been born into a Hindu household, so too may we think that we might have navigated and made sense of it in utterly different ways had our personal histories been different. The issue is that if there are no standards of assessment against which we can judge their respective merits, then we have no guidance in the task of determining which vocabularies we ought to adopt. The world decides which propositions we should endorse, sentences we should assert, and beliefs to hold, but there is nothing 'out there' to which we can appeal to arbitrate between the vocabularies available to us. How, then, are we to adjudicate between the claims articulated through different vocabularies given that both the claims themselves and the standards against which they are taken to be evaluable are articulated in incommensurable terms?

The ethical and political implications of this impasse are nothing short of disastrous. For if the vocabularies in terms of which we speak are incommensurable, then we find ourselves committed to a kind of relativistic ethnocentrism. As Williams puts it, "relativism says simply that if in culture A, X is favoured, and in culture B, Y is favoured, [then] X is right for A and Y is right for B; in particular, if 'we' think X right and 'they' think X wrong, then each party is right 'for itself'".⁴⁸ Indeed, Rorty, embracing this conclusion, claims that "no description of how things are from a God's-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were".⁴⁹ Yet if, as Rorty claims, the historical contingency of the cultural vocabularies into which we are acculturated means that we have no option but to retreat into our own, then questions of truth and value become questions of aesthetic judgement, the problem being that this destroys the conditions of possibility of political thought and community *tout court*. Indeed, this is why Rawls contends that the value pluralism characteristic of modern society ought not be regarded as "an unfortunate condition of human life", but as "the work of free practical reason within the framework of free institutions" – although not, he caveats, as "the work of free reason alone".⁵⁰ This means that while Rorty is correct to

⁴⁸ Williams, Bernard. 2005. 'Human Rights and Relativism'. In *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press. 68. Cf. Queloz, 2025, Ch. 2: The Autoethnographic Stance.

⁴⁹ Rorty, Richard. 1990. 'Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Liberalism'. In *Philosophical Papers*. Vol. 1: Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173643>. Technically, Rorty is not a relativist because he does not think that questions of truth or value can be settled, for a particular culture nor for all, at all. Regardless, cultural relativism and his ethnocentrism are alike enough to warrant simultaneous analysis.

⁵⁰ Rawls, 2005, 37. Even though Rawls' account of an overlapping consensus precludes consideration of substantive conceptions of the good, a similar problem arises for liberal perfectionists such as Joseph Raz (for whom broad

note that the necessary irreconcilability of our beliefs and values under conditions of freedom precludes the possibility of settling the competing claims of different groups in terms of reasons accessible to all, that pluralism is, Rawls claims, the very condition of possibility of a democratic polity.⁵¹ Without inter-vocabulary interaction, the question of adjudicating politically contested matters does not even arise.⁵²

The upshot of this discussion is that if we understand genealogical inquiry as a way of bringing to consciousness the historical constitution of the vocabularies through which we make and assess claims, then one of the major problems to which it is often seen to lead is a politically catastrophic cultural relativism. Genealogical anxiety is thus often experienced as the worry that we cannot make ourselves intelligible to our peers, the foundation of political reason *tout court*.

1.3 Higher-Order Evidence and Epistemological Scepticism

The feature of genealogical inquiry to have occupied the bulk of the contemporary literature's philosophical attention is the way it generates *higher-order evidence* about our beliefs and belief-forming processes. The contemporary literature thus tends to view genealogical inquiry with a pronounced epistemological slant.

Higher-order evidence is evidence that comes to bear on our capacity to assess the rational status of some set of first-order evidence or to determine the conclusions the first-order evidence supports or undermines. Miriam Schoenfield presents the following case to illustrate the intuition:

HYPOXIA: Aisha is flying her airplane on a bright Monday morning, wondering whether she has enough gasoline to fly to Hawaii. Upon looking at the dials, gauges and maps, she obtains some first order evidence E, which she knows strongly supports (say to degree 0.99) either that she has enough gas (G) or that she does not have enough gas ($\sim G$). Aisha does some complex calculations and concludes G, which is, in fact, what E supports. But she then gains some higher order evidence: she realises that she is flying at an altitude that

acceptance of a conception of the good is necessary for an account of political right) since the suggestion that our values are influenced by elements of the cultural environments in which we find ourselves thrown threatens to render the possibility of achieving such consensus across difference inaccessible. Either way, genealogical inquiry appears to destroy the possibility of liberal politics. See Raz, Joseph. 1986. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

⁵¹ For the archetypal articulation of that democratic ethos, see Kant, Immanuel. 1996. 'An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?' In *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, edited by James Schmidt. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

⁵² For additional criticism of the political implications of Rorty's embrace of ethnocentrism, see Fraser, Nancy. 1988. 'Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technocracy'. *PRAXIS International* 8 (3): 257–72.

puts her at great risk for hypoxia, a condition that impairs one's reasoning capacities. Aisha knows that pilots who do the kind of reasoning that she just did, and who are flying at her current altitude, only reach the correct conclusion 50% of the time.⁵³

The question Aisha faces, Schoenfield continues, is this: how confident should she be that G? Aisha does not just have evidence about whether or not G is the case, but also evidence about whether she has appropriately responded to E on whose basis she has concluded that G. Generalising the point, Worsnip notes that the question at the heart of the higher-order evidence debate is whether evidence that belief in some proposition *p* is irrational (or rational for that matter) “should ..., in itself, have an impact not just on your belief ... in the higher-order proposition that your belief ... in *p* is irrational, but also on your belief ... in the first-order proposition *p* itself”.⁵⁴ The key point connecting the higher-order evidence debate to genealogical inquiry is the fact that the aetiologies of our beliefs can yield higher-order evidence about our beliefs.⁵⁵ Indeed, Dutilh Novaes notes that we can think of genealogical anxiety as the expression of “some kind of *conflict* between my first-order and my higher-order evidence”, namely when our beliefs formed on the basis of some evidence and what we believe about their histories support incompatible conclusions.⁵⁶ It is in this respect that we can think of genealogical inquiry writ large as a general strategy for leveraging the higher-order evidence that the history of a belief (or, rather, of our believing it) yields for or against the first-order belief at stake.

⁵³ Schoenfield, Miriam. 2018. ‘An Accuracy Based Approach to Higher Order Evidence’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96 (3): 690. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12329>.

⁵⁴ Worsnip, 2023, 241.

⁵⁵ This connection also explains some of the parallels drawn between genealogical inquiry and peer disagreement. Since the fact of peer disagreement can be understood as evidence about how likely one's own belief is to be correct, the epistemology of disagreement is another guise under which the status of higher-order evidence can be elaborated. In particular, see White, Roger. 2010. ‘You Just Believe That Because...’ *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (1): 573–615. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2010.00204.x> and Mogensen, Andreas L. 2016. ‘Contingency Anxiety and the Epistemology of Disagreement’. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 97 (4): 590–611. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12099>. Cf. Marušić, Berislav, and Stephen J. White. 2023. ‘Disagreement and Alienation’. *Philosophical Perspectives* 37 (1): 210–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12197>. For an overview of the peer disagreement literature, see Kelly, Thomas. 2005. ‘The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement’. In *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*. Vol. 1. Edited by Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Christensen, David. 2007. ‘Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News’. *The Philosophical Review* 116 (2): 187–217. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2006-035>; Elga, Adam. 2007. ‘Reflection and Disagreement’. *Notus* 41 (3): 478–502. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2007.00656.x>; and Lackey, Jennifer. 2010. ‘A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance’. In *Social Epistemology*, edited by Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199577477.003.0015>.

⁵⁶ Dutilh Novaes, 2023a, 114.

1.3.1 Two Conceptions of Justification

While a genealogical inquiry may evince higher-order evidence about a variety of epistemic considerations, the kind typically taken to be most important relates to the *reliability* of our belief-forming processes and hence to the *justifiability* of the beliefs they produce.⁵⁷ According to Alvin Goldman, reliabilism about justification is the theory that “a belief is justified if and only if ... it has an ancestry of reliable and/or conditionally reliable cognitive operations”.⁵⁸ Conversely, a belief is unjustified if and only if it has an ancestry of unreliable and/or conditionally unreliable cognitive operations. On this picture, a belief is justified if we have certain higher-order evidence about the belief-forming process from which it originates, namely that the belief-forming process is generally more likely to yield true beliefs than not. This establishes a close connection between reliabilism and genealogical inquiry precisely because, as Goldman continues, reliabilism “makes the justificational status of a belief depend on its prior history”.⁵⁹ Indeed, it is precisely what he calls the “genetic” nature of the relationship between our (first-order) beliefs and (the higher-order evidence about) how we arrived at them which underpins reliabilist accounts of epistemic justification.⁶⁰

Reliability considerations feature as a premise in the general structure of genealogical argumentation.⁶¹ For Hanno Sauer, Guy Kahane, Shaun Nichols, and Regina Rini, genealogical inquiry proceeds along the following lines:

- 1) *Causal premise*: S's belief that *p* is produced on the basis of belief-forming process *P*.
- 2) *Epistemic premise*: Belief-forming process *P* is unreliable.
- 3) *Hidden premise*: (Beliefs produced on the basis of unreliable belief-forming processes are unjustified.)

⁵⁷ Epistemic externalists such as Williamson do not typically conceive of epistemic reliability as an *account* of justification, but as a *condition* on knowledge. Since, however, knowledge is nevertheless understood as a conjunction of truth, belief, and some additional condition(s), such a conception of reliability serves the same role as a justification condition on knowledge in the present context. I shall thus not discriminate between these two approaches in what follows. For further details, see Williamson, 2000, Ch. 5: Margins and Iterations.

⁵⁸ Goldman, Alvin I. 2012. ‘What Is Justified Belief?’ In *Reliabilism and Contemporary Epistemology: Essays*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812875.001.0001>.

⁵⁹ Goldman, 2012, 41.

⁶⁰ Goldman, 2012, 41.

⁶¹ As we shall see in Section 2.5, this argumentative structure characterises only a subset of the kinds of genealogies found in the literature that I call *debunking genealogies*. Debunking genealogies primarily analyse doxastic items with the objective of undermining their epistemic status. There are, however, forms of genealogical inquiry which analyse other philosophical objects, do not aim to undermine them, or both.

4) *Conclusion*: Therefore, S's belief that *p* is unjustified.⁶²

As we shall see, which of the two dominant approaches to genealogical inquiry we pursue is in large part dependent on the account of reliability we presuppose and therefore on our specific understanding of 2).

The account of epistemic reliability which features in 2) is typically cashed out in one of two ways: *sensitivity* or *safety*. On the one hand, sensitivity accounts of reliability contend that a belief-forming process is reliable if it produces beliefs which track the truth of the matter across modal space. This means that a belief is justified if and only if we believe it if the state of affairs it is about obtains, and we wouldn't believe it were it not to obtain. On the other hand, safety accounts of reliability contend that a belief-forming process is reliable if and only if the beliefs it generates could not easily have been false – if, that is, we would have believed falsely only in comparatively distant possible worlds.⁶³ Genealogical analyses which foreground the *irrelevant influences* impinging on our beliefs appear to tacitly assume a sensitivity account of reliability while analyses which foreground the *contingency* of our beliefs – how easily we might have believed otherwise – appear to tacitly assume a safety account of reliability. Conversely, endorsing a sensitivity account of reliability seems to lend itself to a view of genealogical inquiry that highlights the irrelevant influences on our beliefs while endorsing a safety account of reliability seems to lend itself to a view of genealogical inquiry that highlights the contingency of our beliefs. The implication in each case is that our beliefs are either *inevitable* or *arbitrary* respectively, both of which are legitimate grounds for genealogical anxiety.⁶⁴

⁶² See Sauer, Hanno. 2018. *Debunking Arguments in Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 30; Kahane, Guy. 2011. 'Evolutionary Debunking Arguments'. *Noûs* 45 (1): 106. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2010.00770.x>; Nichols, Shaun. 2014. 'Process Debunking and Ethics'. *Ethics* 124 (4): 731. <https://doi.org/10.1086/675877>; and Rini, Regina A. 2016. 'Debunking Debunking: A Regress Challenge for Psychological Threats to Moral Judgment'. *Philosophical Studies* 173 (3): 677. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0513-2>. Cf. Mason, Kelby. 2011. 'Moral Psychology and Moral Intuition: A Pox on All Your Houses'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89 (3): 450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2010.506515>.

⁶³ It's worth noting that Goldman understands both sensitivity and safety as competing accounts of truth-tracking, and truth-tracking, in turn, as an account of reliability. There is, however, good reason to articulate safety as distinct from the idea of truth-tracking. My belief that I am not a brain in a vat, for instance, could not easily have been false and is thus very safe. But even if I were a brain in a vat I would not believe that I was, so my belief does not track the truth. For present purposes however, I can remain agnostic towards the question of whether or not safety is a species of truth-tracking. See Goldman, Alvin I., and Bob Beddor. n.d. 'Reliabilist Epistemology'. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2021 edition. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/reliabilism/>.

⁶⁴ Roger White makes a comparable distinction among rival approaches to genealogical inquiry. But while I think the relevant distinction is that between sensitivity/inevitability approaches and safety/arbitrariness approaches, he

Both the irrelevant influences and contingency approaches to genealogy have received significant philosophical attention in recent years and have developed into vibrant literatures, each of which make certain features of our epistemic lives salient while obscuring others. Both approaches are closely related as they make use of a common modal vocabulary; *were* our belief-forming processes responsive to contingent features of the epistemic landscape other than those to which they actually are, we *would have* believed otherwise. These approaches to genealogical inquiry are thus not mutually exclusive – since subjunctive descriptions of the relationship between our epistemic states and the epistemic landscape will be frequently (if not always) specifiable in either set of terms – nor are approaches which appear to run them together any the worse for it. Rather, which approach we pursue seems to me more a matter of emphasis since each is appropriate for certain argumentative purposes while being inappropriate for others. Analysing both approaches together has the benefit of making explicit just how contingent the influences pressing on our epistemic states can be and just how easily they could have impressed different, potentially false, beliefs upon us. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity – and since each approach correlates with distinct grounds for genealogical anxiety – I shall examine the two approaches and the accounts of reliability they presuppose separately.

1.3.1.1 *Sensitivity and Irrelevant Influences on Belief*

Let's begin by examining the irrelevant influences approach to genealogical inquiry and the sensitivity account of reliability associated with it.⁶⁵ Setting aside the question of its independent plausibility, Robert Nozick presents the archetypical sensitivity account of reliability. As he puts it, an agent S is justified in believing that *p* if two subjunctive conditionals hold: 1) if *p* were false, then S would not believe that *p*, and

construes the matter according to a distinction between the inevitability and “chanciness” of belief, both of which he articulates through the lens of sensitivity. See White, 2010, 579.

⁶⁵ For an overview of the irrelevant influences literature, see Avnur, Yuval, and Dion Scott-Kakures. 2015. ‘How Irrelevant Influences Bias Belief’. *Philosophical Perspectives* 29 (1): 7–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12060>; DiPaolo and Simpson, 2016; McKenna, Robin. 2019. ‘Irrelevant Cultural Influences on Belief’. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 36 (5): 755–68. <https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12347>; Mogensen, 2016; Schoenfield, Miriam. 2014. ‘Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism Is True and What It Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief’. *Nous* 48 (2): 193–218. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nous.12006>; Schoenfield, Miriam. 2022. ‘Meditations on Beliefs Formed Arbitrarily’. In *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*. Vol. 7. Edited by Tamar Gendler, John Hawthorne, and Julianne Chung. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Vavova, Katia. 2018. ‘Irrelevant Influences’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 96 (1): 134–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12297>; and Worsnip, 2023.

2) if p were true, then S would believe that p .⁶⁶ The idea is that a belief-forming process tracks the truth of the matter if our epistemic state is appropriately responsive to the way things are, representing things as being a certain way when they actually are that way and changing as appropriate when things are not that way.

The irrelevant influences approach to genealogy begins by considering a perturbing possibility: what if our beliefs are in fact the results of belief-forming processes *insensitive* to the truth? What if it turns out that our beliefs instead track features of the epistemic landscape irrelevant to the truth? G. A. Cohen famously retails the story of his stance towards the analytic/synthetic distinction to illustrate the point. Cohen, when presented with the choice of attending Harvard or Oxford for his graduate studies, elected to study at Oxford because, as will become relevant when discussing safety in Section 1.3.1.2, “it seemed much more exciting to leave Montreal for Europe than to leave Montreal for Massachusetts”.⁶⁷ While at Oxford, Cohen came to believe in the truth of the analytic/synthetic distinction on the basis of what he judged to be good reasons and sound arguments. However, he came to realise sometime later that his colleagues “who studied philosophy at Harvard rather than at Oxford for the most part *reject* the analytic/synthetic distinction”.⁶⁸ Having access to the same arguments as he did and believing his Harvard-educated colleagues equally well-equipped to assess their worth, Cohen finds it “disturbing” that “in some sense of ‘because’, and in some sense of ‘Oxford’” he “believe[s] in the analytic/synthetic distinction because [he] studied at Oxford”.⁶⁹ Cohen finds this conclusion disturbing because which university he attended is wholly irrelevant to the question of whether or not he *ought* to believe that analytic and synthetic propositions are necessarily distinct. Indeed, the question ought to be answered solely on the basis of whether or not there actually is a distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. The question facing him – and presumably all other

⁶⁶ Nozick, Robert. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 176. Nozick’s sensitivity account of truth-tracking faces a number of well-known problems, the most significant of which is its denial of an otherwise seemingly reasonable epistemic closure principle. For modified sensitivity accounts which aim to amend the issues raised by such criticisms, and for an overview of the criticisms themselves, see Becker, Kelly, and Tim Black, eds. 2012. *The Sensitivity Principle in Epistemology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Roush, Sherrilyn. 2005. *Tracking Truth: Knowledge, Evidence, and Science*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Zalabardo, José L. 2012. *Scepticism and Reliable Belief*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; and Zalabardo, José L. 2020. ‘Safety, Sensitivity and Differential Support’. *Synthese* 197 (12): 5379–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1645-z>.

⁶⁷ Cohen, G. A. 2000. ‘Paradoxes of Conviction’. In *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 17.

⁶⁸ Cohen, 2000, 18.

⁶⁹ Cohen, 2000, 18.

Oxford- and Harvard-educated graduate students of the 1960s – is whether his belief that there is a distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions is sensitive to the truth of the matter or to some other feature of Oxford's intellectual environment (peer pressure, overexposure to one side of the debate, the desire to impress his distinction-endorsing teachers, etc.) which disposed him to believe that there is regardless of the truth of the matter. The charge Cohen takes himself to be obliged to respond to is that his belief exhibits what Amia Srinivasan calls “*alethic indifference*”, the idea that “our beliefs ... are ... produced by a causal mechanism ... that we have no independent reason to believe will tend to produce true beliefs about the relevant matter”.⁷⁰ The underlying concern is that if our beliefs are alethically indifferent, then we would, as George Sher puts it, continue to hold them even if they were “wrong or baseless”.⁷¹

Investigating the aetiologies of our beliefs sometimes reveals just such a charge to be the case. Indeed, recent empirical work in experimental philosophy, moral psychology, and evolutionary psychology suggests that our belief-forming processes are not sensitive to the truth but to various cultural, psychological, and evolutionary factors in many philosophically significant cases.⁷² Daniel Kelly, for instance, argues that judgements informed by affective disgust responses are unlikely to be sensitive to a case's morally salient features as the cognitive systems which elicit them evolved to instil an aversion to potentially dangerous toxins in rotting food in our evolutionary ancestors.⁷³ Since the disgust response is sensitive to natural

⁷⁰ Srinivasan, Amia. 2019. ‘Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking’. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119 (2): 131. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoz009>. Gideon Rosen, articulating a similar point, notes that “if [he] had been raised by Ghengis [*sic*] Khan, [he] would have been much more tolerant of deliberate cruelty than [he is], and for all [he] know[s], this stance would have been stable upon reflection”. Nevertheless, he goes on to argue that “this exercise does not lead me to find deliberate cruelty any the less repellent”. Rosen, Gideon. 2001. ‘Nominalism, Naturalism, Epistemic Relativism’. *Noûs* 35 (s15): 85 and 86. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.35.s15.4>.

⁷¹ Sher, George. 2001. ‘But I Could Be Wrong’. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2): 66. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052500002909>.

⁷² For a particularly influential argument of this kind which shows, on the basis of empirical survey data, that our intuitions about thought experiments usually taken to be of central philosophical importance – such as Gettier cases, the trolley problem, and the sceptical implications of brains-in-vats – systematically vary according to seemingly irrelevant socio-economic and cultural factors, see Weinberg, Jonathan M., Shaun Nichols, and Stephen P. Stich. 2008. ‘Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions’. In *Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. It's worth noting that the validity and generalisability of Weinberg et al.'s survey findings have since been called into question. See Nagel, Jennifer, Valerie San Juan, and Raymond A. Mar. 2013. ‘Lay Denial of Knowledge for Justified True Beliefs’. *Cognition* 129 (3): 652–61. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2013.02.008> and Kim, Minsun, and Yuan Yuan. 2015. ‘No Cross-Cultural Differences in the Gettier Car Case Intuition: A Replication Study of Weinberg et al. 2001’. *Episteme* 12 (3): 355–61. <https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2015.17>.

⁷³ See Kelly, Daniel. 2013. *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. Jesse Prinz makes a similar argument regarding judgements based on empathy as the disposition to assist in-group members in times of need can be explained in terms of alethically indifferent natural selective pressures. See Prinz,

selective pressures and will thus generate whatever beliefs are conducive to survival irrespective of the truth, the beliefs it produces are unreliable and hence unjustified.⁷⁴ This means, as Sauer notes, that “it is overwhelmingly plausible that evolution has something to do with why we hold [certain] values and not their opposites or something else entirely” such as, as Sharon Street puts it, “the fact that something is purple is a reason to scream at it”.⁷⁵ Moreover, as Sauer continues, moral beliefs formed on the basis of the disgust response are likely “to yield a *high false positive rate*” since although, in natural selective terms, “the cost of foregoing an opportunity for food might occasionally be high, ... it is typically much lower than the cost of ingesting contaminated or rotten food”.⁷⁶ This, he argues, may help to explain some instances of dehumanising attitudes towards out-group members who are “shunned, abused, or killed for being the disgusting vermin that they are”.⁷⁷ For if morally irrelevant features of (or ascribed to) out-group members trigger the cognitive processes which legitimate behaviours evolutionarily reserved for creatures, objects, or practices we find disgusting, then those whose disgust responses are activated in response to out-group members may think it legitimate to perform those behaviours. It goes without saying, however, that being an out-group member does *not* legitimate such behaviours and that shunning, abusing, or killing out-group members is in reality morally opprobrious. As this example makes clear, failing to interrogate the (irrelevant) genealogical origins of our beliefs means that we risk endorsing beliefs which are not just unjustified, but ethically pernicious.

Jesse. 2011. ‘Against Empathy’. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 49 (s1): 214–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2011.00069.x>.

⁷⁴ The same evolutionary reasoning has been deployed to argue that large classes of our beliefs about philosophically important issues rest on belief-forming processes sensitive to natural selective pressures irrelevant to the truth. See, for instance, Street, Sharon. 2006. ‘A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value’. *Philosophical Studies* 127 (1): 109–66. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-005-1726-6>; Ladyman, James, and Don Ross. 2007. *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalised*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Dennett, Daniel. 2007. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. London, UK: Penguin Books; and Greene, Joshua. 2007. ‘The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul’. In *Moral Psychology*. Vol. 3: The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain Disorders, and Development. Edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

⁷⁵ Sauer, 2018, 22 and Street, 2006, 133. As Charles Darwin himself notes, “in the same manner as various animals have some sense of beauty, though they admire widely different objects, so they might have a sense of right and wrong, though led by it to follow widely different lines of conduct. If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering”. Darwin, Charles. 1871. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Vol. 1. London, UK: John Murray. 73.

⁷⁶ Sauer, 2018, 38.

⁷⁷ Sauer, 2018, 39.

Understanding genealogical inquiry as a means of revealing the irrelevant influences to which our beliefs are sensitive suggests that the conclusion we ought to draw from such inquiry is that it is in some sense *inevitable* that we would have ended up holding the beliefs we do.⁷⁸ For if, appearances to the contrary, our beliefs are sensitive to alethically indifferent elements of the epistemic landscape, then it is in some sense predictable that we would hold the beliefs we do. It is precisely this idea that underlies the force of allegations beginning with the refrain ‘you only think that because...’. Indeed, as Dutilh Novaes observes, the problem with “belief-forming processes which are heavily influenced by social and cultural factors” is that holding “certain beliefs [which] seem to be imposed on me by my epistemic environment suggest[s] that I passively adopt them instead of exercising *epistemic agency*. The thought that we have little to no control over what we come to believe or disbelieve seems disturbing”.⁷⁹ On this view, genealogical anxiety duly appears as the fear that we are nothing more than epistemic automata, predictably and irrevocably led astray from the truth. The idea that we cannot extricate ourselves from such error is precisely what David Hume laments in saying that “all those opinions and notions of things, to which we have been accustomed from our infancy, take such deep root, that it is impossible for us, by all powers of reason and experience, to eradicate them” (*T* 1.3.9.17).

1.3.1.2 *Safety and Counterfactual Contingency*

Assuming a safety account of reliability articulates a distinct way of understanding the import of genealogical inquiry. Whereas sensitivity models reliability as a kind of attunement of our epistemic states to the states of affairs they are about, safety construes reliability in terms of how easily we might have believed falsely, that is, in terms of the existence of false beliefs in close possible worlds. The basic idea is that a belief is justified if and only if it is the result of a belief-forming process which could not easily have produced false beliefs. This means, as Ernest Sosa articulates it, that S’s belief that *p* counts as knowledge if and only if “S would believe that *p* only if it were so that *p*”.⁸⁰ Belief-forming processes which do not produce false beliefs in close possible worlds where things are only marginally different – either on the side of the believer or on

⁷⁸ See White, 2010, 579.

⁷⁹ Dutilh Novaes, 2023a, 104-5. For what has become the emblematic account of epistemic agency, see Sosa, Ernest. 2015. *Judgment and Agency*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. See also Fraser, Rachel Elizabeth. 2022. ‘The Will in Belief’. https://marcsandersfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/dogmatism_jan_22.pdf.

⁸⁰ Sosa, Ernest. 1999. ‘How to Defeat Opposition to Moore’. *Noûs* 33 (s13): 142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.33.s13.7>.

the side of the state of affairs in question – are said to be safe. Belief-forming processes which do lead to false beliefs given small counterfactual differences in the conditions of belief are unsafe. Williamson illustrates the idea thus:

Imagine a ball at the bottom of a hole, and another balanced on the tip of a cone. Both are in equilibrium, but the equilibrium is stable in the former case, unstable in the latter. A slight breath of wind would blow the second ball off; the first ball is harder to shift. The second ball is in danger of falling; the first ball is safe. Although neither ball did in fact fall, the second could easily have fallen; the first could not. The stable equilibrium is robust; the unstable equilibrium, fragile.⁸¹

As Williamson continues, the point is that “if one knows, one could not easily have been wrong in a similar case”.⁸² By contraposition, this means that if one could easily have been wrong in a similar case, then one does not know.

As with a sensitivity approach to genealogical inquiry, a safety approach models the reliability of our belief-forming processes as a function of their indifference to changes in the modal environment other than the alethic status of the issue at stake, the beliefs they produce justified if they are robust enough to withstand some degree of modal variance and unjustified if not. Yet whereas a sensitivity approach to genealogical inquiry foregrounds analysis of the hitherto unrecognised elements of the epistemic environment influencing belief, a safety approach lends itself to a focus on the *contingency* of our epistemic states by revealing just how easily the historical circumstances on which our beliefs depend could have been otherwise, i.e., by examining our epistemic states across possible worlds. Cohen chose to study at Oxford because he yearned for a more exciting university experience, but it is all too easy to imagine a close possible world in which he held a countervailing preference for the familiar and thus chose to study at Harvard. With it distinctly possible that he would have impugned the analytic/synthetic distinction in that close possible world, a state of affairs dependent on nothing but the balance of his character leaning one way rather than another, it seems that his belief that analytic and synthetic propositions are distinct is unsafe, and therefore unjustified. It is against this backdrop that the significance of Foucault’s claim that genealogical inquiry attends to the “accidents” of history – the junctures at which things could, with but a slight breath of wind,

⁸¹ Williamson, 2000, 123.

⁸² Williamson, 2000, 147.

have taken a different path – is made visible.⁸³ Given the innumerable many breaths of wind blowing on our epistemologies, a potential source of genealogical anxiety – the kind we shall examine in Section 1.3.2 – is the idea that *none* of our beliefs are safe.

That our beliefs, concepts, and practices are thoroughly contingent is typically understood as genealogical inquiry's characteristic result. Yet it is perhaps also its most perplexing. For the suggestion is that a belief's contingency undermines its rational standing even though, according to sensitivity, it is precisely *because* we would have believed otherwise in the present had things been otherwise in the past that our beliefs track the truth. Indeed, it is straightforwardly a truism that had things been different in the past, they would have been different in the present. Had I not been gifted Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* as a child, I may not have reflected on the moral significance of The Fall and thus wouldn't have become interested in philosophy. Had my mother not been a restaurant owner when I was a child, I may not have enjoyed cooking as much as I do now. Had I been raised Catholic, I may have believed that the Pope is St Peter's successor as ultimate pastor of God's flock on Earth. Indeed, that our beliefs are contingent upon the states of affairs to which they are directed appears to be an indication that they are reliable, that all is well epistemically.

Additionally, the fact that we may have believed differently had we had different personal formations does not seem to amount to a critique of our *actual* beliefs because we are ourselves just as much a product of contingency as the beliefs we hold. Indeed, as Williams so eloquently puts it, it is

precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks [that] we can accept that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours; or, more precisely, has both made us, and made the outlook as something that is ours.⁸⁴

Since the contingency of our beliefs, outlooks, dispositions, preferences, practices, and institutions is just what makes us the individuals we are and the cultures we inhabit our own, it would appear egregious to

⁸³ Foucault, 1984a, 80. Foucault's comparative analysis of the rival conceptions of penalty vying for uptake in the late 17th and early 18th Centuries is a paradigm example of this strategy. For of the various methods and programmes of punishment put forward, Foucault argues that it was as much a matter of chance that the prison became the dominant penal institution as it was a matter of its affinity with an emerging logic of corporeal discipline conducive to the expansion of the modern nation-state and the institutions of early capitalism such as the military, the school, the hospital, and the factory. See Foucault, 1995, 104-31.

⁸⁴ Williams, Bernard. 2000. 'Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline'. *Philosophy* 75 (4): 490. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100000632>.

reproach one for the beliefs we actually have just because we could have easily held different ones. This is just another way of expressing the fact, as discussed in Section 1.1, that the history of a belief does not seem to come to bear on whether or not we ought to endorse it for the simple reason that how a belief came about is an entirely separate issue to whether or not it is true.

How, then, ought we understand the genealogist's claim of contingency if we are to make sense of the conclusion the genealogist intends us to draw from it? In order to make genealogy's revelation of contingency philosophically interesting, we must return to our discussion of higher-order evidence. For although the contingency of a belief may not by itself affect its rational status, *believing* that we would have believed otherwise given small variations in the modal environment constitutes higher-order evidence against its safety. Indeed, to suggest otherwise has a Moore-paradoxical ring to it. The revelation of contingency thus seems to express a tension between the first- and higher-order evidence to which we have access. As Sher articulates it,

The same consideration that is so congenial to liberal principles that require us to distance ourselves from our moral beliefs in political contexts is decidedly uncongenial to our efforts to marshal these moral beliefs when we deliberate as individuals. My awareness that I would now have different moral convictions if I had had a different upbringing or different experiences may make it easier for me to put my moral beliefs out of play in the interest of allowing competing beliefs a fair hearing, or for the sake of arriving at terms of social cooperation acceptable to all. This same awareness, however, makes it correspondingly harder for me to act on my moral convictions when these conflict with the moral convictions of others. There is an obvious tension between my belief that my moral assessment of a situation is right while yours is wrong and my further belief that it is only an accident of fate that I assess the situation in my way rather than yours.⁸⁵

How we proceed depends on whether or not we believe ourselves to be the beneficiaries of what Srinivasan calls "good genealogical luck".⁸⁶ The animating idea is that unlike the Christian child anxious to figure out if her beliefs are true and values valuable given that she would have held other beliefs and values had she been born into a Hindu household, we might stick rather than twist and claim that we, not one of our infinitely many genealogical doppelgängers, are simply lucky enough to have been born into a time and culture with the epistemic resources to be able to form true beliefs and apprehend what is really valuable. It

⁸⁵ Sher, 2001, 65.

⁸⁶ Srinivasan, 2019, 135. See also Srinivasan, Amia. 2015. 'The Archimedean Urge'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 29 (1): 347-9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12068> and Elga, Adam. 2008. 'Lucky to Be Rational'. Presented at the Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference, Bellingham, WA. <https://www.princeton.edu/~adame/papers/bellingham-lucky.pdf>.

is but an unhappy quirk of fate that those of our genealogical doppelgängers unfortunate enough to have been born before the Copernican Revolution were not born into a historical period with the scientific resources to form true beliefs about the organisation of the stars and planets and hence incorrectly believe in the truth of the geocentric model of the universe. We can only speculate, with the benefit of projected hindsight, about the myriad ways in which it might turn out that we are the genealogically unlucky ones.

In some sense, genealogical luck is a brute reality. Some, like us, are lucky enough to have been born after the Copernican Revolution so can form true beliefs about the organisation of the solar system. Others were unlucky and erroneously believed the Earth to be at the centre of the universe. Simple as that. Yet as Richard Joyce argues, the issue with claiming that we are genealogically lucky is that it simply tests the limits of credulity to suppose that out of all the possible beliefs and values we might have held, we just so happened to have arrived at the truly true and really valuable ones.⁸⁷ For Street, the suggestion that we did is akin to “setting out for Bermuda and letting the course of your boat be determined by the wind and tides”: although “the push of the wind and tides on your boat has nothing to do with where you want to go”, one may get lucky “every now and then” as “the wind and tides might happen to deposit someone’s boat on the shores of Bermuda”.⁸⁸ It goes without saying that finding oneself on the shores of Bermuda in such a manner does not mean that one is an able seafarer. Indeed, the point both Joyce and Street make is that while we may *in fact* be genealogically lucky, our beliefs true, and our values valuable, such a position is unsafe for there are close possible worlds in which we believe falsely, our beliefs and values ending up on different shores had the winds and tides of history pushed us in different directions. Indeed, one of those possible worlds may even turn out to be the actual world.

The conclusion that the safety approach to genealogical inquiry (and its concomitant emphasis on the contingency of belief) encourages us to draw is that the matter of which beliefs we hold is ultimately

⁸⁷ See Joyce, Richard. 2007. *The Evolution of Morality*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

⁸⁸ Street, 2006, 121. Street contends that we can nevertheless rescue our ground-level moral judgements by adopting an anti-realist metaethical stance towards them because it does not make sense to think of their justificatory status being undercut because they do not track the truth if there is no mind-independent truth to track at all. See Street, 2006, 152-4. Indeed, as Sauer puts it, “a process of judgment formation cannot be *off track* if there is no track to be *on*”. Sauer, 2018, 54. See also Kahane, 2011, 112; Street, Sharon. 2018. ‘Does Anything Really Matter or Did We Just Evolve to Think So?’ In *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, edited by Gideon Rosen, Alex Byrne, Joshua Cohen, Elizabeth Harman, and Seana Shiffrin, 2nd ed. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company. 910-1; and Vavova, Katia. 2015. ‘Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism’. *Philosophy Compass* 10 (2): 104–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12194>.

arbitrary.⁸⁹ In contrast to the sensitivity approach, which claims that our beliefs track elements of the epistemic environment irrelevant to what they ought, the underlying suggestion here is that our beliefs do not track anything at all. Instead, they are merely the epistemic expression of historical accident, which way the ball falls from its unstable equilibrium simply a question of which way the wind happens to blow. As on the sensitivity account, this means that we may experience genealogical anxiety in response to the thought that we lack epistemic agency, that we are not sovereign over our epistemic lives because our beliefs are but the expressions of phenomena beyond our control or understanding. This is the issue we shall examine in Section 1.4. For now, however, we shall turn to the problem facing both sensitivity and safety approaches to genealogy.

1.3.2 Epistemological Scepticism

Both sensitivity and safety approaches to genealogical inquiry yield *prima facie* grounds for genealogical anxiety, the former by construing our beliefs as inevitable, the latter by construing them as arbitrary. Yet regardless of which account of reliability we assume, there is a deeper problem that genealogical inquiry raises for those who understand it as a means of generating higher-order evidence about our belief-forming processes: the threat of global *epistemological scepticism*. The basic idea is that since *all* of our beliefs are susceptible to genealogical explanation, if it turns out that none of our beliefs are reliable, then none of our epistemic states are justified, and if none of our epistemic states are justified, then none of our epistemic states can count as knowledge. With the majority of the recent literature focussing on the epistemic foundations and implications of genealogical inquiry, this is the guise, acknowledged or not, under which genealogical anxiety has typically appeared in recent years.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ What Andreas Mogensen calls “contingency anxiety” – the unease we experience “upon discovering that certain beliefs we hold are contingent on *arbitrary* features of our background [own emphasis]” – highlights exactly this aspect of genealogical anxiety. Mogensen, 2016, 590.

⁹⁰ For an illuminating corollary, see the critiques of Foucault’s supposed scepticism about truth and reason in Taylor, Charles. 1984. ‘Foucault on Freedom and Truth’. *Political Theory* 12 (2): 152–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591784012002002>; Putnam, Hilary. 1981. ‘Reason and History’. In *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625398>; and Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 2-3. Cf. Lorenzini, Daniele. 2022. ‘Reason Versus Power: Genealogy, Critique, and Epistemic Injustice’. *The Monist* 105 (4): 541–57. <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onac016> and Lorenzini, Daniele. 2023. *The Force of Truth: Critique, Genealogy, and Truth-Telling in Michel Foucault*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Much genealogical inquiry proceeds by aiming to undermine the justificatory status of some class of beliefs, such as those based on disgust or ideological indoctrination, by showing the belief-forming processes from which they originate to be unreliable. The issue, however, is that genealogical inquiry seemingly cannot but implicate elements of the epistemic landscape beyond its initial target set due to the impossibility of individuating the beliefs and belief-forming processes at stake from those falling outside the scope of inquiry. This means that while the genealogist will typically restrict her investigation to the justificatory status of some *particular* epistemic locale precisely to avoid presenting a *global* sceptical argument, local genealogical inquiry nevertheless threatens to collapse into it.

Why, then, might we think that genealogical inquiry inevitably slides from local to global scepticism? The problem arises in virtue of the fact that if the genealogist is not to beg the question against her interlocutor, she must be able to provide some independent reason with which to justify why she has chosen to investigate the beliefs and belief-forming processes she has rather than others; why *these* beliefs and not *those* beliefs. For if the elements of the set in question resemble the elements of its complement, then she must either provide an argument for why the resemblance is irrelevant or show that some other property shared by the elements of the target set is what's really at stake. Indeed, as Kahane argues, if we have reason to think that the epistemic status of a token element of the target set is genealogically suspect, then “the epistemic status of [the set's] reasoned extension should also be suspect”.⁹¹ This means that if some target belief is shown to be unreliable, then we ought to think that those it resembles are unreliable too.

The issue comes to a head in light of the fact that there simply is no non-circular means of introducing a scope restriction capable of distinguishing between those beliefs and belief-forming processes that ‘genuinely’ warrant genealogical investigation and those that do not. This is because, as Srinivasan puts it, “any judgement about what counts as a ... [reliable belief-forming process] will have to be informed, in a circular fashion, by whether we judge the relevant [belief] to be a case of knowledge”.⁹² Indeed, the

⁹¹ Kahane, 2011, 119. See also Rini, 2016. Cf. Yeo, Shang Long. 2020. ‘Defusing the Regress Challenge to Debunking Arguments’. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 50 (6): 785–800. <https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2020.31> and Lazari-Radek, Katarzyna de, and Peter Singer. 2012. ‘The Objectivity of Ethics and the Unity of Practical Reason’. *Ethics* 123 (1): 9–31. <https://doi.org/10.1086/667837>.

⁹² Srinivasan, 2019, 133. Nelson Goodman argues that this circularity need not be vicious since “the process of justification is the delicate one of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences; and in the agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either”. As he famously puts it, “a rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend”. Goodman, Nelson. 1983. *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. 4th ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 64.

epistemic state produced by my seeing that that thing over there is a tree is an instance of knowledge *not* because we have independently determined visual perception over short distances on a clear day to be a reliable belief-forming process. Rather, the fact that I can tell, that I know, that that thing over there is a tree is what licenses the inference to the claim that visual perception over short distances on a clear day is a reliable belief-forming process – which in turn licenses us to infer that any other epistemic state yielded by such a process is, *ceteris paribus*, also (likely to be) an instance of knowledge. As a result, the risk we face is that if we are to genealogise anything, we must genealogise everything. And if we must genealogise everything, then global epistemological scepticism becomes a distinct possibility. Yet with every domain of inquiry vulnerable to genealogisation, it may turn out that none of our beliefs are justified, that genealogical reflection, as Williams might have put it, “can destroy knowledge”.⁹³

As we shall see in Section 2.3, this conclusion can be understood as a premise in a *reductio*. For if global scepticism is false (as many believe to be the case), then some element of the genealogical argument from which it arises must have gone awry, a possibility in which the genealogically anxious may find solace. If, however, global scepticism is considered a live option, then we have reason to believe that genealogical inquiry is antithetical to knowledge, and hence reason to be genealogically anxious regarding our epistemic states. Indeed, genealogical anxiety does not necessarily consist in the claim that genealogical inquiry *reveals* epistemological scepticism to be true, but rather the more modest suggestion that it *may* be. Regardless, experiencing genealogical anxiety in response is perfectly legitimate.

Whether or not we view global scepticism as a live option depends in large part on whether we view the slide from local to global scepticism from a first- or third-personal perspective. For as Dutilh Novaes notes, “for the epistemic agent herself, realising that some of her core beliefs may have been formed by processes allowing for the interference of these irrelevant factors poses a problem that is not merely theoretical; it can in fact become a source of existential angst”.⁹⁴ Indeed, viewed from the outside, the question of whether my beliefs are reliable under genealogical examination may be resolved in virtue of their relation to the evidence. Yet viewed from the *inside*, the issue is that the beliefs at stake are frequently some of our deepest held commitments, beliefs, as Street puts it, “such that I would regard myself as having

⁹³ Williams, Bernard. 2011. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London, UK: Routledge. 148.

⁹⁴ Dutilh Novaes, 2023a, 104.

vanished or died were I to lose them".⁹⁵ The complication to which those doubtful of genealogical inquiry's cogency must respond is hence not how to identify which of our beliefs are reliable and which not, but that we are not dealing with just any beliefs in the abstract. Rather, we are dealing specifically with our own, with the commitments and values constitutive of the agent engaging in philosophical reflection in the first place. The danger is thus not only that we do not have knowledge, but that genealogical inquiry threatens to destroy the knowing agent herself.

1.4 Naturalism and Normative Nihilism

1.4.1 Naturalism and Explanation

The third and final way of conceptualising genealogical inquiry that we shall examine is one which foregrounds its *naturalism*. In its most expansive sense, philosophical naturalism is the position that humanity and human culture are in some important sense part of nature. So uncontroversial is this suggestion that naturalism may at first glance appear simply true, and trivially so. Human beings are (at least in part) biological entities subject to the laws of nature whose brain states (at least in part) support mental states and psychologies which (at least in part) support the epistemic states and practices constitutive of human culture. Indeed, as Williams notes, if the question at stake is "whether our account of semantic relations is to be consistent with physics, the answer had better be 'yes'".⁹⁶ It is thus not clear of what interest it is to say that genealogical inquiry is naturalistic.

There is, however, a more philosophically interesting way of understanding naturalism in general and of understanding the naturalism of genealogical inquiry specifically. For rather than merely a commitment to consistency with the results of physics, naturalism can also be understood as a deflationary strategy intended to resist the suggestion that the philosophical resources required to understand human culture are, as P. J. E. Kail puts it, "radically different in kind from those taken to be operative in the natural ... world".⁹⁷ Indeed, according to Nietzsche, the objective of philosophical naturalism is not to establish

⁹⁵ Street, Sharon. 2012. 'Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason'. In *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, edited by James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 57.

⁹⁶ Williams, 2000, 485.

⁹⁷ Kail, P. J. E. 2009. 'Nietzsche and Hume: Naturalism and Explanation'. *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 37 (1): 6. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jnietstud.37.2009.0005>.

the supremacy of science, but to “translate humanity back into nature”.⁹⁸ Commitment to this goal is what explains Nietzsche’s repeated reference to man as the “interesting” (*GM* I:6), “honest” (*GM* I:9), “civilised” (*GM* I:11), promissory (*GM* II:2), “calculating” (*GM* II:8), “sick” (*GM* III:13), and “delicate” (*GM* III:15) animal in the *Genealogy*.⁹⁹ The point is not to elevate scientific empiricism, but rather to bring the supernatural back down to earth.¹⁰⁰

Understanding naturalism in genealogical inquiry requires that we first distinguish between what Brian Leiter calls “substantive naturalism” and “methodological naturalism”.¹⁰¹ On the one hand, substantive naturalism is “the (ontological) view that the only things that exist are natural ... things”.¹⁰² On this view, stars, trees, atoms, hair follicles, and bacteria have an ontologically robust existence while minds, capitalism, women (*qua* women), men (*qua* men), and nation-states do not. On the other hand, methodological naturalism is the view that philosophical inquiry should be “continuous with empirical inquiry in the sciences”.¹⁰³ For methodological naturalists, the only explanatory resources philosophy should avail itself of are, for the sake of global explanatory parsimony, those which restrict philosophy’s conceptual toolbox to those items which might figure in scientific explanation.¹⁰⁴ As Queloz articulates it, the point of methodological naturalism is not, *contra* substantive naturalism, to “refute explanations” involving the metaphysically non-natural, but rather to “undermine[...] the explanatory need for them by offering more parsimonious counterproposals”.¹⁰⁵ Methodological naturalists are often substantive naturalists, but the positions do not entail each other. Genealogical inquiry is often (but not always) substantively naturalistic. It is, however, *always* methodologically naturalistic.¹⁰⁶ I shall thus focus on methodological naturalism in genealogical inquiry.

⁹⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2002. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman. Translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. §230.

⁹⁹ Cf. *GM* III:25.

¹⁰⁰ Indeed, the starting point of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* is his refusal to “search[...] for the origin of evil *beyond* the world” (*GM* P:3).

¹⁰¹ Leiter, Brian. 2015. *Nietzsche on Morality*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge. 4-5 and 2.

¹⁰² Leiter, 2015, 4.

¹⁰³ Leiter, 2015, 2.

¹⁰⁴ As Spinoza puts it, the point is to explain things in terms of principles which are “everywhere the same”. Spinoza, Benedict de. 2018. *Ethics: Proved in Geometrical Order*. Edited by Matthew J. Kisner. Translated by Matthew J. Kisner and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge University Press. III Praef.

¹⁰⁵ Queloz, 2021, 107.

¹⁰⁶ For a discussion of Nietzsche’s naturalism in particular, see Kail, 2009, 7; Leiter, 2015, 5; and Janaway, Christopher. 2007. ‘Naturalism and Genealogy’. In *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy*. Oxford, UK:

Given its centrality to scientific explanation, methodologically naturalistic genealogical inquiry typically employs the explanatory resources of *causation*. The basic idea is that doing so enables us to explicate some issue of philosophical concern in terms we find familiar and unproblematic, the appeal of doing so being that we are thereby able to *demystify* the issue in question.¹⁰⁷ Hume, for instance, seeks to provide a causal explanation of morality by presenting our moral beliefs and concepts as the causal results of our pre-reflective sentiments of approbation and disapprobation and our natural inclination to infer a common cause from similar experiences.¹⁰⁸ Updating the argument in light of modern cognitive science, John Searle argues that intentionality can be understood as akin to “such simple and obvious cases as hunger and thirst” because intentional states are “caused by brain processes and realised in the brain system” and are therefore explicable in terms of “real animal biology”.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Searle elsewhere argues that social and institutional facts are ultimately explicable in virtue of our dispositions and cognitive states in contexts requiring collective action.¹¹⁰ Similarly, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, the thinkers Paul Ricœur refers to as the “masters of suspicion”, argue that religious ideology, Christian morality, and personality formation can be explained in terms of class relations, the will to power, and one’s resolution of the Family Romance respectively.¹¹¹ In each case, the underlying idea is that genealogical inquiry can help us to understand persistently puzzling philosophical issues by identifying their causal origins and cashing out their developmental dynamics in some explanatorily more basic strata. Indeed, the irrelevant influences approach to genealogical inquiry examined in Section 1.3.1.1 is a paradigmatic of this project. For while the goal of the irrelevant influences approach is to reveal our beliefs to be generated by alethically indifferent belief-forming processes, we can

Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199279692.001.0001>. See also Leiter’s claim that “the genealogy is not only a *history* of morality that rejects the evidential value of morality’s present meaning for discovering its origin, but it is also a distinctively *naturalistic* history, an account of the origins of morality without appeal to supernatural causes”. Leiter, 2015, 138.

¹⁰⁷ See Queloz, 2021, 28.

¹⁰⁸ In particular, see T 3.1.1 and 3.3.1. See also Kail, 2009, 15-6.

¹⁰⁹ Searle, John R. 2004. *Mind: A Brief Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 164. See also Searle, John R. 1983. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173452>.

¹¹⁰ See Searle, John R. 1996. *The Construction of Social Reality*. London, UK: Penguin Books.

¹¹¹ Ricœur, Paul. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 33. See also Leiter, Brian. 2006. ‘The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud?’. In *The Future of Philosophy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. For a comparable conception of the relationship between the normative demands of patriarchy and sexual difference, see Stone, Alison. 2005. ‘Towards a Genealogical Feminism: A Reading of Judith Butler’s Political Thought’. *Contemporary Political Theory* 4 (1): 4–24. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300135>.

also understand the approach as a way of showing that our beliefs are simply the effects of causal processes beyond our control, processes that genealogical inquiry enables us to interrogate.

1.4.2 Physicalistic Reductionism

The problem that genealogy's naturalism introduces is that placing causal explanations front and centre raises the spectre of what Williams calls "physicalistic reductionism", the view, as Robert Brandom puts it, that "*all* the explanatory work can be done by causes", that *everything* there is to explain can be explained in terms of cause and effect.¹¹² That includes explanatory work we would normally think requires the distinctively normative explanatory resources with which we usually talk about significant areas of human culture and experience. While we find it perfectly reasonable to explain the behaviour of other animals – even animals which exhibit socially complex behaviours or high levels of intelligence – exclusively in terms of biological and evolutionary facts, we would (rightly) find it unsatisfactory to describe the totality of human behaviour and culture in the same way.¹¹³ Indeed, as Huw Price puts it, the suggestion "that natural science properly constrains philosophy" appears so restrictive as to exclude central issues of philosophical concern including value, aesthetic experience, counterfactuals, and qualia.¹¹⁴ Some will be prepared to bite that bullet. Others will be justifiably more reticent.

For those less than willing to concede that our normative vocabulary can be reduced to talk of cause and effect, the chief danger of genealogically-induced physicalistic reductionism is that it *eliminates* the functional role of reasons in explanation, that there is, as Brandom continues, "no work left to be done by reasons", that they are explanatorily superfluous.¹¹⁵ The worry is thus not just that our discursive activity is

¹¹² Williams, 2002a, 22 and Brandom, Robert. 2012. 'Reason, Genealogy, and the Hermeneutics of Magnanimity'. Presented at the UC Berkeley Graduate Council Lectures, Berkeley, CA, November 12. https://sites.pitt.edu/~rbrandom/Texts/Reason_Genealogy_and_the_Hermeneutics_of.pdf. 6 (published in German as Brandom, Robert 2015. 'Den Abgrund reflektieren: Vernunft, Genealogie und die Hermeneutik des Edelmutts'. *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift Für Sozialforschung*, no. 1, 3–26).

¹¹³ This is precisely the complaint that many have levelled against Searle's naturalism about the mind, although he explicitly rejects the charge. See Searle, John R. 2008. 'Reductionism and the Irreducibility of Consciousness'. In *Emergence: Contemporary Readings in Philosophy and Science*, edited by Mark A. Bedau and Paul Humphreys. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262026215.003.0009>.

¹¹⁴ Price, Huw. 2013. *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 3.

¹¹⁵ Brandom, 2012, 6. See also Korsgaard, Christine M. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 45–6; Sinhababu, Neil. 2018. 'Ethical Reductionism'. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 13 (1): 32–52. <https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v13i1.247>; and Moon, Andrew. 2023. 'Global Debunking Arguments'. In *Evolutionary Debunking Arguments: Ethics, Philosophy of Religion, Philosophy of Mathematics, Metaphysics, and Epistemology*, edited by Diego E. Machuca. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003026419>.

influenced by causal factors distorting what we take to be reasons for and against what, but that all we have access to are, as Brandom puts it, “causes *masquerading as reasons*”.¹¹⁶ While we may think that we hold a belief because we are responsive to the reasons standing in (and against) its favour, genealogical inquiry, he says, “tells us what is *really* going on by presenting the underlying mechanism actually responsible for our taking this rather than that as appropriate, fitting, or correct”.¹¹⁷ The key point, however, is that if a causal explanation can be given for “why we make the judgements we do instead of some others – then the issue of the rational justifiability of those attitudes lapses” because, as Brandom continues, “belief is supposed to be sensitive to its semantic content (and its inferential involvements), not to pragmatic features having to do with the believing rather than what is believed”.¹¹⁸ Genealogical inquiry’s “reductive naturalism” means, Brandom tells us, that nothing *warrants* belief; we just believe.¹¹⁹

Revealing that our cognitive responsive dispositions are governed by causal rather than rational considerations means that questions of justification do not – indeed, cannot – arise. For if genealogical investigation reveals that we believe what we do simply because of causal processes beyond our control, then it becomes nonsensical to ask if we *ought* to believe that *P* in much the same way that it is nonsensical to ask whether a plant *ought* to photosynthesise carbon dioxide and water into oxygen and glucose.¹²⁰ Indeed, Kant reproaches Locke’s empiricist epistemology for failing to grasp precisely this normative dimension of discursive activity. For Locke, all ideas are the product of experience, either sensation or reflection.¹²¹ We believe what we do because of the particular experiences we have had and the mental operations we have undertaken. Yet Locke’s account, Kant notes, merely explains *why* we hold the beliefs or utter the assertions we do while lacking the resources to answer the question of whether we *ought* to hold or utter them. For that, an account of rational warrant is needed, precisely the kind of account naturalism (seemingly) precludes.

¹¹⁶ Brandom, 2012, 4.

¹¹⁷ Brandom, Robert. 2019a. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 562.

¹¹⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 562-3.

¹¹⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 556.

¹²⁰ Cf. Brandom’s discussion of the distinction between a thermostat reliably responding to variations in temperature and our use of the concepts “hot” and “cold”. Brandom, Robert. 2000a. *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 159-65.

¹²¹ See Locke, John. 1997. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Roger Woolhouse. London, UK: Penguin Books. I.1.2-5.

Understood along these lines, genealogical inquiry portends the dissolution of discursivity writ large and thereby outlines a vision of human agency according to which one is, in Isaiah Berlin's words, "dependen[t] on outside factors, liab[le] to be a plaything of the external world that [we] cannot ... fully control, and which *pro tanto* controls and 'enslaves' [us]".¹²² As he continues,

if the essence of men is that they are autonomous beings – authors of values, of ends in themselves, the ultimate authority of which consists precisely in the fact that they are willed freely – then nothing is worse than to treat them as if they were not autonomous, but natural objects, played on by causal influences, creatures at the mercy of external stimuli, whose choices can be manipulated by their rulers, whether by threats of force or offers of rewards. To treat men in this way is to treat them as if they were not self-determined.¹²³

It is in this respect that genealogy's perceived attempt to fold the space of reasons into the space of law reveals, according to Brandom, that the former is nothing but a "swaddling illusion" maintained to console us in our slavery, a fantasy invented to distract us from the fact that we are "not, as we are pleased to think, autonomous *rational* animals, but merely needy, insecure, *rationalising* animals".¹²⁴ It is for this reason that Brandom claims that genealogy presents "the most fundamental possible challenge to the Kantian picture of us as normative creatures".¹²⁵ "The stakes", as he continues, "are very high".¹²⁶

1.4.3 Normative Nihilism

While the threat of epistemological scepticism is reason enough to regard the historical constitution of our beliefs with anxiety, genealogy's naturalism raises an even greater philosophical problem. That problem is the threat of *normative nihilism*, the worry that the causal origins of our discursive dispositions entails that there are (and can be) no standards of assessment capable of determining the correctness or incorrectness of a performance, linguistic, mental, epistemic, or practical. If successful, the argument implies that the historical contingency of our discursive practices dismantles the conditions of possibility of normativity, meaning, and intentionality *tout court*. Yet despite its significance and its connection to foundational issues

¹²² Berlin, Isaiah. 2002. "Two Concepts of Liberty". In *Liberty*, edited by Henry Hardy, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 183. <https://doi.org/10.1093/019924989X.003.0004>.

¹²³ Berlin, 2002, 183.

¹²⁴ Brandom, 2012, 6.

¹²⁵ Brandom, 2019a, 556.

¹²⁶ Brandom, 2019a, 558.

in the theory of meaning, this threat has remained strikingly undertheorised in the literature. If we are to analyse this issue appropriately, we must shift the locus of our attention away from genealogical inquiry's epistemic assumptions and implications towards its *semantic* underpinnings.¹²⁷

To my mind, the strongest articulation of the issue is to be found in Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox.¹²⁸ The rule-following paradox articulates a problem for the very idea of meaning as normatively bound, namely a somewhat natural way of thinking about meaning as 'going on' in accordance with a particular pattern of behaviour. As the story goes, I mean the colour *red* by the term 'red' because it is the term I and others have used in the past to describe roses, cocktail cherries, and fire hydrants and not sunflowers, grass, or snow. Meaning *red* upon encountering a ripe tomato can thus be thought of as following the rule governing my previous uses of the term 'red', viz. utter only when referring to *red* things. Yet while it has been a source of much philosophical consternation since *Philosophical Investigations* was first published, surprisingly little attention has been afforded to the rule-following paradox's fundamentally genealogical character. Indeed, its concern to articulate the consequences of the thoroughgoing contingency of the ways of going on governing our discursive practices would seem to establish a powerful affinity between the two literatures. This means that we can legitimately understand the normative disorientation induced by the rule-following paradox as an expression of genealogical anxiety.

Of all the treatments it has received, Saul Kripke's reconstruction of the rule-following paradox captures its significance best. While rightly criticised for his interpretation of Wittgenstein's solution to the rule-following paradox, criticism we shall examine ourselves in Section 3.2, his presentation of the problem is particularly clear. At the risk of getting ahead of myself, Kripke conceives of the rule-following paradox as a puzzle arising from the idea that the correctness or incorrectness of my claiming to have meant something by some term requires that "there ... be some fact about my past usage that can be cited" to justify it.¹²⁹ The basic idea follows from the seemingly undeniable intuition that what following a rule

¹²⁷ As I shall argue in Section 3.3.2, it is not at all clear whether it is possible to understand epistemological questions independently of semantic ones (and *vice versa*). Indeed, treating them as distinct philosophical issues is, I contend, one of the initial errors which raises the prospect of normative nihilism in the first place. Nevertheless, I simplify things here for the sake of clarity.

¹²⁸ For a brief overview of the significance of rule-following in the history of philosophy, see Rosen, Michael. 2001. 'The Role of Rules'. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 9 (3): 369–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672550110058812>.

¹²⁹ Kripke, Saul A. 1982. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell. 9.

consists in must be *factive*.¹³⁰ For as Wittgenstein notes, if we are to give the notion of following a rule any substance at all, then we must have a “criterion of correctness” (*PI* §258) against which we can distinguish *actual* from merely *apparent* instances of rule-following. Indeed, as Davidson notes, one of the “necessary conditions for the emergence of language and propositional thought” is the “creati[on of] a space in which there can be success and failure”, the possibility of error standing as a condition on the possibility of correctness.¹³¹ Moreover, whichever criterion we use must be appropriately independent of our *inclination* to characterise linguistic performances as instances of rule-following. “Otherwise”, as Wittgenstein rightly notes, “thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it” (*PI* §202). Indeed, were the criterion *not* independent of our disposition to judge a performance one way or the other, then “whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can’t talk about ‘right’” (*PI* §258). This means, as Kripke continues, that unless we can point to “a candidate for a ‘fact’ that ... tell[s] me what I ought to do in each new instance”, then all talk of right and wrong, correctness and incorrectness, is rendered unintelligible.¹³² That, in any case, is the conclusion that the proponent of Kripke’s paradox would have us accept.

The force of the rule-following paradox consists not just in the sceptical claim that it is impossible to *know* which fact we ought to use as a criterion for the assessment of instances of rule-following, but that, as Kripke puts it, “nothing in my mental history or past behaviour – not even what an omniscient God would know” – could once and for all determine what I mean.¹³³ This is because, as he continues, “there is no fact about me that distinguishes between my meaning [such and such] (which determines my responses in new cases) and my meaning nothing at all”.¹³⁴ If the argument is sound, then all talk of correctness and

¹³⁰ As we shall see in Section 1.4.3.2, Wittgenstein formulates the rule-following paradox to encourage us to give up the assumption that meaning consists in some fact of the matter (or at least one way of understanding what counts as the facts of the matter).

¹³¹ Davidson, Donald. 2000. ‘Truth Rehabilitated’. In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 71.

¹³² Kripke, 1982, 24.

¹³³ Kripke, 1982, 21. The quotation here corrects a misprint found in the 1982 edition of *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, the word “or” replacing “of” as it mistakenly appears in the book. For the correct wording, see Kripke, Saul A. 1981. ‘Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language’. In *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, edited by Irving Block. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell. 249

¹³⁴ Kripke, 1982, 21.

incorrectness dissolves in our hands and “the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air”.¹³⁵ The threat of normative nihilism is clear and dreadful.

Yet as we shall see, the threat that the rule-following paradox poses cannot be resolved simply by clarifying some philosophical misunderstanding. Instead, we must alter the very conception of norm-governed discursive practice from which the paradox arises. Alleviating the genealogical anxiety the rule-following paradox engenders thus demands that we revise similarly basic strata of our discursive practices. As I shall argue in Chapter 3, it is precisely Wittgenstein’s radical suggestion for how to do so that points towards a novel way of releasing us from genealogical anxiety’s grip.

1.4.3.1 *Language as Contract*

Let’s begin the task of reconstructing the rule-following paradox by addressing the first and most obvious question that presents itself: what is the picture of meaning and normativity from which the rule-following paradox emerges? The answer, Wittgenstein tells us, is a particularly natural, commonplace view of language and meaning, one in which what it is to grasp a meaning is a matter of understanding the rules governing the use of the word to which it is correlated. By identifying the series of errors that lead us up this blind alley, the hope is that we can correct our mistake and free ourselves from the picture of language holding us “captive” (*PI* §115).

Wittgenstein’s objective is to expose the absurdity of a vision of language according to which linguistic competence consists in consciously grasping how to abide by the rules governing the use of linguistic expressions. Those rules are codified in the grammar and syntax of our language. The normative assessment of our discursive practices is possible in virtue of those rules, an utterance correct if it conforms to the rules governing its performance and incorrect otherwise. Following a rule is in turn to be understood as understanding, on the basis of a finite number of previous cases, when it is appropriate to use a given term in indefinitely many novel cases. On this picture, a term’s meaning, as Wittgenstein articulates it, “*determines* which steps are to be taken [my emphasis]” (*PI* §190) as if the rules governing its use were “rails invisibly laid to infinity” (*PI* §218), the uniquely correct way of following them already placed before us yet

¹³⁵ Kripke, 1982, 22. Cf. Brandom, Robert. 2019b. ‘Some Strands of Wittgenstein’s Normative Pragmatism, and Some Strains of His Semantic Nihilism’. *Disputatio* 8 (9): 81–109. <https://doi.org/10.5281/ZENODO.2631339>.

somehow “contained” (*PI* §197) in our grasp of the rule. As Crispin Wright puts it, we are in other words “committed to certain patterns of linguistic usage by the meanings we attach to expressions [my emphasis]”.¹³⁶

To endorse such a picture of language is, as John McDowell puts it, to think of meaning in “contractual terms”.¹³⁷ On this picture, what it is “to learn the meaning of a word is to acquire an understanding that *obliges* us subsequently ... to judge and speak in certain determinate ways, on pain of failure to obey the dictates of the meaning we have grasped [my emphasis]”.¹³⁸ For David Lewis, this picture of language models the norms of linguistic exchange “as straightforward directives concerning behaviour” which function akin to the “constitutive rules” of a game.¹³⁹ In the same way that entering into a contract is to express a resolution in the present about how one will (and ought to) act in the future, grasping a meaning is, on this picture, to make a determination about one’s future conduct – viz. to continue using a term in the future as we (take ourselves to) use it in the present – in an indefinite number of (relevantly similar) novel cases. How we are to understand such a similarity clause, as well as the idea of ‘projecting’ a present intention into the future, will be of critical importance in the task of explicating the rule-following paradox.

Intersubjective communication is possible on this picture because subscribing to the contract to which all members of a linguistic community are party ensures uniformity of meaning across linguistic tokens. Indeed, Wittgenstein notes that there *must* be a “regular connexion” between “the sounds [people] make, and their actions” lest they “fall into confusion” (*PI* §207); it is difficult to even imagine what intentionality would look like were the members of a linguistic community to speak in such a way that they meant something different each time they uttered a particular word. It is this connection between speech and action which constitutes (or, as we shall see in Chapter 3, at least partly constitutes) the public character of language.

¹³⁶ Wright, Crispin. 1980. *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*. London, UK: Duckworth. 21.

¹³⁷ McDowell, John. 1984. ‘Wittgenstein on Following a Rule’. *Synthese* 58 (3): 325.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00485246>.

¹³⁸ McDowell, 1984, 325.

¹³⁹ Lewis, David. 1979. ‘Scorekeeping in a Language Game’. *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 344.
<https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1007/BF00258436>. It’s worth noting that Lewis immediately expresses doubts about the prospects of such a strategy. For another objection to this strategy, see Habermas, Jürgen. 2001. ‘From a Constitutive Theory to a Communicative Theory of Society (Sellars and Wittgenstein): Communicative and Cognitive Uses of Language’. In *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, translated by Barbara Fultner. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

1.4.3.2 *The Rule-Following Paradox*

Having outlined the background conception of language that Wittgenstein aims to criticise, we can now introduce the rule-following paradox proper. We can begin to formulate the basic idea by reflecting on the following question: if grasping a meaning consists in following the rules governing the use of our terms, then how do we understand how to correctly follow the rules themselves?

Let's examine a concrete case to explicate the point. Kripke makes use of a simple mathematical example: the rule of arithmetic addition. Suppose that I claim to grasp the rule of addition. Suppose also that I have never, as a matter of fact, solved for the sum of any number greater than 57. I am then asked to find the solution of the following equation: $68 + 57 = x$. Since I know that '+' denotes addition, and since I grasp the rule of addition, I answer, correctly, that $x = 125$. But now, Kripke continues, suppose that "I encounter a bizarre sceptic" who claims that on the basis of my past usage of addition, I should have answered 5; indeed, that I actually *meant* to answer 5 and that I have become confused as to what I meant by addition in answering 125.¹⁴⁰ What I *really* meant to denote by '+', so the sceptic contends, was a "quaddition" function, a function which yields identical results to addition for numbers less than 57, and 5 otherwise, so that $68 \text{ "quus" } 57 = 5$. It is only now, so the sceptic claims, that "under the influence of some insane frenzy, or a bout of LSD, I have come to misinterpret my own previous usage".¹⁴¹ Of course the sceptic's challenge is not to be answered with a psychological evaluation or drug test. Rather, Kripke's point is that we would normally think that a satisfactory justification for my answer of 125 would consist in an appeal to my following "directions I previously gave myself that uniquely determine that in this new instance I should say '125'" even though I have not, *ex hypothesi*, "told myself that I should say '125' in this very instance".¹⁴² Moreover, I cannot advert to "the rule exhibited by my previous examples" since which rule my previous uses of '+' instantiate is precisely the issue at stake.¹⁴³ "The problem", Kripke states,

is not "How do I know that 68 plus 57 is 125?", which should be answered by giving an arithmetical computation, but rather "How do I know that '68 plus 57', as I *meant* 'plus' in the *past*, should denote 125?" If the word 'plus' as I used it in the past, denoted the quus

¹⁴⁰ Kripke, 1982, 8.

¹⁴¹ Kripke, 1982, 9.

¹⁴² Kripke, 1982, 10.

¹⁴³ Kripke, 1982, 11.

function, not the plus function ('quaddition' rather than addition), then my *past* intention was such that, asked for the value of '68 plus 57', I should have replied '5'.¹⁴⁴

Wittgenstein notes that an appropriate response to such a sceptic would be to dismiss them as "insane" (OC §468), a "half-wit" (OC §257), or at any rate as speaking "nonsense" (OC §§21-37). But suppose she persists. What can we answer her? For one, we could reply that this construal of what it is to grasp the rule of addition is wrongheaded. For the whole idea of grasping a rule, as we have seen in our preceding discussion of the contractual conception of rule-following, consists in something beyond the extension of a finite set of previous performances into a general norm. Indeed, as Kripke notes, "I did not merely give myself some finite number of examples, from which I am supposed to extrapolate the whole table [of addition] No doubt infinitely many functions are compatible with *that*".¹⁴⁵ Rather, addition is generally defined set theoretically. For any set A with elements n , count out how many elements are in A . For any set B with elements m , count out how many elements are in B . Then, for the set $A \cup B$, count out how many elements are in $A \cup B$. The number of elements in $A \cup B$ is the result of $n + m$. This, let us suppose, is the rule before my mind when I solve $68 + 57$. So clearly is this definition of addition engraved on my consciousness that confusing it for quaddition is scarcely imaginable.¹⁴⁶

The problem with this response should, however, be obvious. For this proposed stipulation of how we ought to interpret addition merely kicks the problem up a level. All the sceptic need do is argue, as Kripke continues, that

by 'count' I formerly meant *quount*, where to 'quount' [the elements of a set] is to count it in the ordinary sense, unless the [set] was formed as the union of two [sets], one of which has 57 or more [elements], in which case one must automatically give the answer '5'.¹⁴⁷

It should be clear that this sets us off on a regress. For no matter how robustly we may try to define the intended interpretation of 'counting', the definition will itself include terms that must themselves be interpreted, terms that are in their turn subject to the sceptic's mad objections. It is precisely this realisation

¹⁴⁴ Kripke, 1982, 12.

¹⁴⁵ Kripke, 1982, 15.

¹⁴⁶ For an account of comparable issues facing Platonist conceptions of mathematical objects, see Benacerraf, Paul. 1965. 'What Numbers Could Not Be'. *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1): 47–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183530> and Benacerraf, Paul. 1973. 'Mathematical Truth'. *The Journal of Philosophy* 70 (19): 661–79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025075>.

¹⁴⁷ Kripke, 1982, 16.

which leads Kant, in the development of his own account of discursive normativity, to object to the notion that grasping a rule is itself something understood explicitly, representationally, or as the result of judgement.

Contra our initial construal of what grasping a rule consists in, Kant notes that

If the understanding in general is explained as the faculty of rules, then the power of judgment is the faculty of **subsuming** under rules, i.e., of determining whether something stands under a given rule (*causus datae legis*) or not. ... Now if it [*sic*] wanted to show generally how one ought to subsume under these rules, i.e., distinguish whether something stands under them or not, this could not happen except once again through a rule. But just because this is a rule, it would demand another instruction for the power of judgment, and so it becomes clear that although the understanding is certainly capable of being instructed and equipped through rules, the power of judgment is a special talent that cannot be taught but only practised. (*KrV* A132-3/B171-2)¹⁴⁸

The upshot of the conundrum we find ourselves facing is nothing less than disastrous. For if any putatively rule-governed performance (or set of performances) can be construed as the result of following any other rules, then, as Wittgenstein famously proclaims,

no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. ... If everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here (*PI* §201).

Since the idea of accord is what undergirds normative language generally, nothing less than the possibility of normativity is at stake.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Wilfrid Sellars and Lewis Carroll, the latter in allegorical fashion, present versions of the same regress of rules argument in Sellars, Wilfrid. 2007a. 'Some Reflections on Language Games'. In *In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, edited by Kevin Scharp and Robert Brandom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 28-9 and Carroll, Lewis. 1895. 'What the Tortoise Said to Achilles'. *Mind* 4 (14): 278–80. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/IV.14.278> respectively.

¹⁴⁹ Worse yet, this paradox is generalisable over the entire universe of discursive practice. Nelson Goodman, for instance, famously argues that inductive reasoning seems to fall foul of the same concern since the idea of finding "an accurate and general way of saying which hypotheses are confirmed by, or which projections are validly made from, any given evidence" – i.e., of inferring a general hypothesis on the basis of a finite set of observations – is a direct corollary to the idea of following a rule indefinitely into the future on the basis of a finite number of applications. With the result that any evidence can confirm any hypothesis, "we are left ... with the intolerable result that anything confirms anything". Goodman, 1983, 84 and 75. Hilary Putnam, in the foreword to the fourth edition of *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, also recognises the connection between Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations and Goodman's new riddle of induction. Putnam in turn credits his awareness of this connection to Catherine Elgin. See Goodman, 1983, xiii–ix. For an even further generalised account of this issue, see Putnam, Hilary. 1977. 'Realism and Reason'. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 50 (6): 483–98. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3129784>. See also Kowalenko, Robert. 2022. 'The Putnam-Goodman-Kripke Paradox'. *Acta Analytica* 37 (4): 575–94. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12136-022-00507-2>.

The question that immediately presents itself at this point is whether or not it is possible to halt the regress. Indeed, there is some *prima facie* evidence for the suggestion that Wittgenstein himself is hopeful about the prospect; after all, as he frequently reminds us, “giving grounds ... come[s] to an end sometime” (*OC* §110).¹⁵⁰ Hence, Wittgenstein notes that “what one wants to say is: ‘Every sign is capable of interpretation; but the *meaning* mustn’t be capable of interpretation. It is the last interpretation’” (*BB* 34).¹⁵¹ The image thus yielded is one in which meaning and rule-following consist, as McDowell puts it, in “possessing an interpretation that cannot be interpreted – an interpretation that precisely bridges the gap ... between the instruction one received in learning the expression and the use one goes on to make of it”.¹⁵² Wittgenstein likens the image to that of an “ideally rigid machine which *can* only move in such-and-such a way” (*PI* §194), the ways we can (correctly) follow a rule rigidly defined in advance, each step an output of some pre-programmed input working of its own accord.¹⁵³

The problem with understanding rule-following along the lines of an ideally rigid machine is that it kicks us back to the contractual conception of rule-following according to which grasping a meaning is to travel along a set of infinite rails pre-laid ahead of us, the mythologisation of which started us down the path ending with the regress of rules. On this picture, rules are understood to definitively settle what we ought to do and assuage our doubts about how we ought to go on. But since we can nevertheless both grasp a rule *and* fail to follow it, the question at the heart of this conception of rule-following is, as Michael Dummett puts it, “whence does a human being gain a freedom of choice in this matter which a machine does not

¹⁵⁰ See also *OC* §204 and *PI* §1.

¹⁵¹ It’s important to note that it is perfectly possible to accept that explanation must come to an end without accepting that the meaning of a term is the last interpretation. Rather, Wittgenstein’s point seems to be that one way in which we are tempted to cash out commitment to the former view is by endorsing the latter.

¹⁵² McDowell, 1984, 332.

¹⁵³ See also Kripke, 1982, 32-7. Cf. Wittgenstein’s discussion of our understanding of a sign-post at *PI* §85. For Wittgenstein, “a rule stands there like a sign-post” in the sense that what counts as following it correctly is not given by the sign-post itself. A sign-post removed from its role in our practices is just a configuration of planks of wood of various shapes; it just stands there. “Where is it said,” he continues, “which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?” For McDowell, *all* facts share this quality on the ‘uninterpreted interpretation’ reading. For if a fact is to have rational significance, it must be subject to some interpretation that stipulates how it ought to be understood. As he continues however, this is precisely the master thesis that Wittgenstein aims to challenge.

possess?”¹⁵⁴ Indeed, the issue, as Brandom notes, is that a rule can settle what we ought to do “only insofar as it is itself correctly applied. ... Applied incorrectly, any interpretation misleads”.¹⁵⁵

With the suggestion that rule-following consists in the grasp of an interpretation simply landing us back where we started, Brandom goes on to consider an alternative proposal. On the picture considered thus far, rules are forward-looking prescriptions which explicitly tell us what we ought to do. The alternative is to think of rules as *post hoc* codifications of the regularities pervading our discursive practices.¹⁵⁶ On this picture, a rule is “just a pattern exhibited by behaviour”, the distinction between correct and incorrect performance identified with the distinction “between *regular* and *irregular* performance”.¹⁵⁷ This means that knowing how to follow a rule need not involve a prior grasp of anything at all since, as Brandom notes, “the only one who needs to understand how to apply correctly the rule conforming to which makes performances count as regular is the theorist who describes the regularity in terms of that rule”.¹⁵⁸ Indeed, on this view, rules are ultimately descriptions of how we go on anyway.

There are two problems with understanding rules as expressions of the regularities structuring discursive conduct. On the one hand, McDowell rightly notes that there is a fundamental difference “between the significance of, say, ‘This is yellow’ and the significance of, say, ‘This would be called “yellow” by (most) speakers of English””.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, whether a term is used correctly or incorrectly is not a matter of our patterns of utterance or of how we regularly go on, but whether or not the state of affairs to which the term refers warrants its use, i.e., if, in the present case, the object in question actually is yellow. On the other hand, Brandom notes that “any particular set of performances exhibits many regularities”.¹⁶⁰ This means, as he continues, that “any further performance will count as regular with respect to some of the patterns exhibited by the original set and as irregular with respect to others”.¹⁶¹ As a consequence, no matter how

¹⁵⁴ Dummett, Michael. 1959. ‘Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Mathematics’. *The Philosophical Review* 68 (3): 331. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2182566>.

¹⁵⁵ Brandom, Robert. 1994. *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 21.

¹⁵⁶ Brandom, 1994, 26-8.

¹⁵⁷ Brandom, 1994, 28.

¹⁵⁸ Brandom, 1994, 27.

¹⁵⁹ McDowell, 1984, 335.

¹⁶⁰ Brandom, 1994, 28.

¹⁶¹ Brandom, 1994, 28. For an example of this idea, see Nelson Goodman’s analysis of the constructed predicates *grue* and *bleen*. Goodman, 1983, 74-5.

one elects to go on, “there is some regularity with respect to which it counts as ‘going on in the same way’”.¹⁶² Without some means of selecting *which* regularity is appropriate for each case, that is, of determining which regularity *ought* to govern a particular instance of rule-following, this approach will be perpetually unable to furnish a distinction between how we go on as a matter of fact and how we *ought* to go on.

According to McDowell, the rule-following paradox thus presents us with a dilemma “between a Scylla and a Charybdis”.¹⁶³ On the one hand, if we understand rule-following as a matter of grasping some interpretation, then we either face the regress of rules or we endorse what McDowell calls the “fantastic mythology of the super-rigid machine” extending itself of itself into the future.¹⁶⁴ Both commit us to the picture of rule-following that Brandom calls *regulism*, the idea that normative assessment is “governed by propositionally *explicit* prescriptions, prohibitions, and permissions”.¹⁶⁵ Arguing against this picture, Wittgenstein claims that

there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not an interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases (*PI* §201).

On the other hand, if we understand rule-following as acting in accordance with the regularities implicit in our discursive practices, then normativity seems to fall out of the picture entirely since, as Kripke puts it, “the relation of meaning and intention to future action is *normative*, not *descriptive*”.¹⁶⁶ This is the picture that Brandom calls *regularism*.¹⁶⁷ Scylla is the idea that “understanding is always interpretation”.¹⁶⁸ Charybdis is the equally disastrous idea that there is “a basic level at which there are no norms”.¹⁶⁹ The challenge we face is thus to chart a course between them.

¹⁶² Brandom, 1994, 28.

¹⁶³ McDowell, 1984, 341.

¹⁶⁴ McDowell, 1984, 342.

¹⁶⁵ Brandom, 1994, 19.

¹⁶⁶ Kripke, 1982, 37.

¹⁶⁷ See Brandom, 1994, 26-7.

¹⁶⁸ McDowell, 1984, 341.

¹⁶⁹ McDowell, 1984, 342.

If unanswered, it is difficult to understate quite how disastrous the consequences of the rule-following paradox are. For Kripke, if unaddressed, the rule-following paradox shows nothing less than that “there can be no such thing as meaning anything by any word. Each new application we make is a leap in the dark; any present intention could be interpreted so as to according with anything we may choose to do”.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, while the rule-following considerations are commonly understood to show the impossibility of a so-called ‘private’ language, Kripke reads the rule-following paradox as having “shown *all* language, *all* concept formation, to be impossible, indeed unintelligible”.¹⁷¹ Wholesale nihilism about norms seems the inevitable result and with it the impossibility of minded intentionality.

Where, then, do we go from here? There are two commonly-cited proposals for how we ought to understand rule-following in the literature which (putatively) rely neither on the idea of grasping an interpretation nor on the idea of a basic level at which there are no norms: *foundationalism* and *communitarianism*.¹⁷² Providing a (brief) explication and assessment of each proposal will be the subject of our discussion in Section 3.2. For now, it will suffice simply to note that whereas the rule-following paradox emerges as a consequence of the view, as Brandom puts it, that linguistic and practical “acts are liable to normative assessments insofar as they are governed by propositionally *explicit* prescriptions, prohibitions, and permissions”, foundationalism and communitarianism are both expressions of the view that the normative is to be founded, in one way or another, on what Wittgenstein calls non-normative, prelinguistic “bedrock”, the point at which our “spade is turned” (*PI* §217).¹⁷³ For foundationalism and communitarianism, the strategy consists in identifying the objective regularities exhibited in the metaphysical structure of the world or imputing normative significance to our regularities of behaviour respectively. As

¹⁷⁰ Kripke, 1982, 55.

¹⁷¹ Kripke, 1982, 62. Kripke, of course, also thinks that Wittgenstein supplies an answer to the rule-following paradox and thereby a means of rehabilitating meaning. As I see it, Wittgenstein accomplishes just that (to a point), but not in the communitarian manner in which Kripke understands him. We shall examine this issue briefly in Section 3.2.

¹⁷² A third approach to rule-following to be found in the literature is *ironism*. I refrain from discussing ironism in this thesis because although it is pessimistic about the prospects of foundationalism (like communitarianism), it is *counterfactually* foundationalist. Indeed, while ironists deny that there are metaphysical foundations on which rule-following can be grounded, they nevertheless hold that *were* it possible to legitimate our rule-following once and for all, such legitimation *would have to be* derived from the structure of the world’s metaphysical foundations. It is thus sufficient for our purposes to show, as I shall in Section 3.2, that foundationalism is unacceptable. See also Queloz, 2025, 120.

¹⁷³ Brandom, 1994, 19.

we shall see in Section 3.3, both strategies assume a mistaken metasemantic picture, a picture they share with the view of norms as explicit principles, which destroys what plausibility they might otherwise have.

1.4.3.3 *Rule-Following and Genealogical Anxiety*

The task remaining for us to complete in this chapter is to make explicit the specifically genealogical nature of the preceding discussion of rule-following. Indeed, one might be rather perplexed at this point. What, after all, does any of this have to do with genealogical anxiety? There are two ways we can articulate the connection, both of which immediately bring the intuition to a head.

On the one hand, let us consider again Wittgenstein's (undoubtedly correct) point that giving grounds must come to an end at some point. The question that seemingly demands an answer is just this: where ought we draw the game of giving grounds to a close? For as we have seen, it is always possible to find another interpretation 'standing behind' whichever we happen to have settled on. The authority of the final interpretation, like the Ancient image of the world supported on the back of an elephant, "constitute[s]", as Wilfrid Sellars puts it, "the tortoise on which stands the elephant on which rests the edifice of empirical knowledge" (*EPM_S* §34). The issue, however, is that we can always ask "What supports the tortoise?" (*EPM_S* §38). Wherever we choose to bring things to a close appears just as arbitrary as any other, the possibility of continuing to give grounds a perpetually live option. Additionally, if, as Wittgenstein also argues, settling on a point of argumentative departure "is only a decision for a practical purpose" (*OC* §49), then it appears that the end of inquiry is just a function of the practical exigencies that structure the lives of beings like us at our particular point in history. It is, however, precisely those practical exigencies which are in principle always susceptible to genealogical challenge. For if we follow rules as we do just because of the pressures of our circumstances, circumstances which are often the product of social forces beyond our knowledge, then the entire notion of going on as we *ought* to is rendered void. It is thus reasonable to argue that the discomfort one might experience upon recognising what Wittgenstein calls "the groundlessness of our believing" (*OC* §166) is really a form of genealogical anxiety from which, if Kripke's sceptic is to be believed, we have no hope of respite.

On the other hand, consider the alternative strategy of questing for an appropriate non-normative "bedrock" (*PI* §217) on which the normative can be founded. The connection to genealogical inquiry is arguably even clearer in this case given how immediately considerations of brute contingency come to the fore. For should we fail to heed Wittgenstein's warning against trying to dig below normative bedrock rather

than “recognis[ing] the ground that lies before us as the ground” (*RFM* VI-31), then, as McDowell puts it, “one is likely to be struck by the sheer contingency of the resemblances between individuals on which, in this vision, the possibility of meaning seems to depend, and hence impressed by an apparent precariousness in our making sense of one another”.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, if it turns out that pursuing such a strategy is a viable option, then, as William Child notes, “there is a close relation between semantic and normative facts on the one hand, and lower-level, non-semantic and non-normative facts on the other; if the lower-level facts were very different, then the semantic and normative facts would be different, too”.¹⁷⁵ If Child is correct and normative facts are to some extent supervenient upon non-normative facts, then had the historical contingencies into which we find ourselves thrown been otherwise, then, as Cavell notes, “English might have developed differently than it has and therefore have imposed different categories on the world than it does; and if so, it would have enabled us to assert, describe, question, define, promise, appeal, etc., in ways other than we do”.¹⁷⁶ For one, this suggests that the matter-of-factual contingencies structuring both our innate and learned dispositions, capacities, and needs exert decisive influence over central logical and linguistic notions such as what we “treat[...] as something to test by experience” and what “as a rule of testing” (*OC* §98). But for another, given G. E. M. Anscombe’s widely accepted contention that an act is intentional only if the agent performing it recognises it as intentional “under a description”, this means, as Ian Hacking notes, that “if new modes of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence”.¹⁷⁷ This means, on the one hand, that we can chart new realms of freedom by changing our discursive practices, a task that may be easy in some cases and hard in others. Yet it also means, on the other, that our freedom is especially vulnerable to curtailment by the often surreptitious forces that structure our discursive practices. That our possibilities for action are bounded arbitrarily, that we are in some sense *unfree*, not as a result of coercion but of the structure of practical reason itself, will inevitably strike some as deeply disturbing.

¹⁷⁴ McDowell, 1984, 348.

¹⁷⁵ Child, William. 2019. “We Can Go No Further”: Meaning, Use, and the Limits of Language’. In *Wittgenstein and the Limits of Language*, edited by Hanne Appelqvist. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351202671>. 105. See also Child, William. 2019. ‘Meaning, Use, and Supervenience’. In *Wittgenstein on Philosophy, Objectivity, and Meaning*, edited by James Conant and Sebastian Sunday. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷⁶ Cavell, 2015, 30.

¹⁷⁷ Anscombe, G. E. M. 1957. *Intention*. 2nd ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. §§19-23 and Hacking, Ian. 2002a. ‘Making Up People’. In *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 108.

In response, McDowell argues that the “feeling of precariousness” with which one regards “the right to claim to understand [another person]” is unwarranted since “to envisage its loss is not necessarily to envisage its turning out that I never had the right at all”.¹⁷⁸ This is, however, no consolation for the genealogically anxious. For the precariousness of normativity is precisely what genealogical anxiety consists in, the idea, as McDowell himself articulates it, that “nothing but a tissue of contingencies stands in the way of my losing [the right]”, that normative warrant writ large is unsafe.¹⁷⁹ It is no help to the genealogically anxious to say that we *haven't* lost our normative warrant; the anxiety consists in the realisation of just how easily we *could*. Indeed, as Cavell puts it,

we learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then we are expected, and expect others, to be able to project them into further contexts. Nothing insures that this projection will take place (in particular, not the grasping of universals nor the grasping of books of rules), just as nothing insures that we will make, and understand, the same projections. That on the whole we do is a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humour and of significance and of fulfilment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation – all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’. Human speech and activity, sanity and community, rest upon nothing more, but nothing less, than this. It is a vision as simple as it is difficult, and as difficult as it is (and because it is) terrifying.¹⁸⁰

Even if it turns out that following a rule correctly is not as illusory as Kripke’s sceptic makes it seem, this is why the rule-following paradox ought to be considered a form of genealogical anxiety, its seeming intractability what brings the drama to such extraordinary heights. Intensifying the problem of genealogical anxiety in this way is thus a means of heightening the tension of which it is an expression and of underscoring its philosophical significance. It is also why genealogical anxiety is bound up with the question of how – given the brute contingency of the dispositional, cultural, and historical forces which shape both us and our discursive practices – genuinely binding, rationally authoritative norms are possible.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ McDowell, 1984, 349.

¹⁷⁹ McDowell, 1984, 349.

¹⁸⁰ Cavell, Stanley. 1962. ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy’. *The Philosophical Review* 71 (1): 74. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183682>.

¹⁸¹ Given that the overarching objective of this thesis is to dissolve genealogical anxiety as a problem requiring solution, one of the objectives I shall seek to accomplish in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 is to show that this ‘how possible?’ question is itself ill-formed.

2 Genealogy: A Conceptual Map¹

A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about’.

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *PI* §123

2.1 Introduction

The blossoming literature on genealogy in recent years has come as somewhat of a pleasant surprise to the historically inclined among us. It has not, however, come without its problems. The literature on genealogy is, I think, organised around two overarching conflation. These conflation are related: if the first is avoided, the second is often committed instead. Both conflation preclude an accurate apprehension of the diversity of genealogies in the literature, their distinguishing features, and the challenges they face. Indeed, the two objections most commonly raised against genealogy – the genetic fallacy and self-defeat objections – each present serious problems for the viability of genealogy. However, both objections are often inappropriately levelled against genealogies that do not seem to be susceptible to them due to overgeneralisations resulting from these conflation. Disentangling our understanding of genealogy from these two conflation and the pervasive misconceptions which depend on them can therefore help us to clarify the circumstances under which these objections go through (and why) and when they fail (and why). As I shall show, a new two-dimensional typology can help us to better assess the viability and philosophical value of genealogy.

The literature on genealogy is typically organised according to either a bipartite or tripartite typology. According to the bipartite typology, genealogies fall into one of two categories: what are

¹ This chapter first appeared as Ratcliffe, Julian. 2024. ‘Genealogy: A Conceptual Map’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 32 (4): 1255–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12949>. The version presented here has received minor modifications for consistency and to account for literature published since its original publication.

sometimes called *debunking genealogies* and *vindictory genealogies*.² Broadly construed, debunking genealogies *undermine* our beliefs and vindictory genealogies *legitimate* our beliefs.³ Archetypes of the former include Hume's naturalistic critique of religion and Xenophanes' ironic interrogation of the anthropomorphism of the gods.⁴ Archetypes of the latter include Edward Craig's, Bernard Williams', and Philip Pettit's state of nature arguments about the concept of knowledge, the emergence of the virtues of truth, and moral realism respectively.⁵

The issue with the bipartite typology is that it is unable to account for an important class of genealogies – paradigms of which include Friedrich Nietzsche's, Michel Foucault's, and Judith Butler's genealogies of Christian morality, the modern French penal system, and the category of 'woman' respectively⁶ – which certainly aren't vindictory yet aren't exactly debunking either, at least not in the same way that Hume's and Xenophanes' are. These genealogies are instances of what has been called *problematising genealogy*. The first conflation arises from a pervasive misunderstanding of the kinds of objects problematising genealogy targets, the result being that they are often lumped together with debunking genealogy despite important differences in their argumentative structures and the broader critical projects in which they are situated. As a result, the distinctive features of some of the literature's most interesting

² Debunking genealogies are also sometimes referred to as *subversive genealogies*. Confusingly, what I call problematising genealogies below are also sometimes called subversive genealogies. The extent to which this use of nomenclature is a result or cause of the confluences pervading the literature is an issue I shall set aside. See Shklar, Judith. 1972. 'Subversive Genealogy'. *Daedalus* 101 (1): 129–54 and Craig, Edward. 2007. 'Genealogies and the State of Nature'. In *Bernard Williams*, edited by Alan Thomas. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511611278.009>.

³ As noted at Section 1.3.1, fn. 61, the picture of the different approaches to genealogical inquiry examined in Chapter 1 tends to assume debunking genealogy as its default conception of genealogical inquiry. One of the objectives of this chapter is to complicate this initial assumption.

⁴ See Hume, David. 1990. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Edited by Martin Bell. London, UK: Penguin Books and Xenophanes. 1995. 'Xenophanes'. In *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, edited by S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve, translated by R. D. McKirahan, Jr. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company. 21B14-6.

⁵ See Craig, Edward. 1991. *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Williams, Bernard. 2002a. *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; and Pettit, Philip. 2018. *The Birth of Ethics: Reconstructing the Role and Nature of Morality*. Edited by Kinch Hoekstra. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

⁶ See GM; Foucault, Michel. 1995. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. 2nd ed. London, UK: Vintage Books; and Butler, Judith. 2006. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

genealogies are frequently overlooked or misconstrued and are often subject to inappropriate standards of assessment. Let's call this first conflation the *debunking/problematising conflation*.⁷

Cognisant of the threat of the debunking/problematising conflation, some contributors, most notably Amy Allen and Colin Koopman, have made use of a *tripartite* typology.⁸ Where debunking and vindicatory genealogies undermine and legitimate our beliefs respectively, problematising genealogy is *normatively neutral* because it does not stipulate the attitudes we are required to adopt towards our beliefs.⁹ Rather, it draws critical attention to the structure of what we might call our *background frameworks*, the discursive formations which delimit what we can even think of designating *as* potential objects of belief in the first place. Examples include the conceptual apparatuses which figure in belief and judgement, the cognitive and perceptual capacities and dispositions of epistemic agents, the social and historical context of utterance, and patterns of other presupposed beliefs. They are the discursive landscapes on which belief stands out in relief, the banks through which the river of belief flows. The tripartite typology can thus be represented as a normative spectrum with debunking and vindicatory genealogies at each end and problematising genealogy staking out the neutral mid-point.

The second conflation risks being smuggled in at this point on the back of an ambiguity arising from problematising genealogy's distinctive structure. Problematising genealogy is unique for its possession of two faces, one oriented towards the past, the other towards the future. Although (putatively) normatively neutral, problematising genealogy retains its critical force by leveraging the interrelation between its past- and future-oriented components. Problematising genealogy's past-oriented component seeks to trace the historical processes which have constructed our background frameworks, the discursive spaces which

⁷ It's worth noting that these confluations are not unique to the recent literature on genealogy. As we shall see in Section 2.6, Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser are, I think, guilty of conflating debunking and problematising genealogies in their critiques of Foucault, the result being that they both misunderstand the nature of his genealogies and his broader critical project.

⁸ See Allen, Amy. 2008. *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press; Allen, Amy. 2010. 'The Entanglement of Power and Validity: Foucault and Critical Theory'. In *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O'Leary and Christopher Falzon. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell; and Koopman, Colin. 2013. *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. See also Saar, Martin. 2002. 'Genealogy and Subjectivity'. *European Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2): 231–45. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0378.00159> and Sluga, Hans. 2010. "I Am Simply a Nietzschean". In *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O'Leary and Christopher Falzon. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. 42.

⁹ It is important to note that while Allen does indeed adopt a tripartite typology, she is critical of Koopman's claim that problematising genealogy, at least as it is found in Foucault, is normatively neutral. See Allen, Amy. 2014. 'The Normative and the Transcendental: Comments on Colin Koopman's Genealogy as Critique'. *Foucault Studies*, no. 18: 240-1. <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i18.4662>.

delimit what we can even countenance as an object of belief. If the conclusion of that investigation is that the structure of the background framework in question is accidental and could have been otherwise, problematising genealogy's future-oriented component aims to expand the field of discursive possibilities by creating the space for the designation of new objects of belief.¹⁰ The confusion consists in thinking that the future-oriented component of problematising genealogy is a distinct form of genealogy and not the complementary extension of problematising genealogy's past-oriented component.

Additionally, drawing a distinction between the past- and future-oriented components of problematising genealogy precludes appropriate recognition of recent work by Robert Brandom, Catarina Dutilh Novaes, and Matthieu Queloz.¹¹ Although the genealogies they present also seek to reorganise the discursive landscape, they do so by identifying the rational and practical norms lying unarticulated in our existing discursive practices rather than by expanding the discursive field. I call this kind of genealogy rationalising genealogy. We can thus call this second confusion the *problematising/rationalising conflation*.

The problematising/rationalising conflation results from the continued use of the limited hermeneutical resources provided by the single (normative) dimension of analysis along which the bipartite typology is organised. We thus cannot untangle it simply by adding another category to our typology for a yet more fine-grained analysis. Instead, we must rethink the *structure* of our typology. I hence propose a *two-dimensional* typology of genealogy. It adopts the *normative* dimension (X-axis) along which the bi- and tripartite typologies are organised but adds to it a dimension which tracks the *kind of object* investigated (Y-axis). Looking along the X-axis, debunking and problematising genealogies are undermining, and vindicatory and rationalising genealogies are legitimating. Looking along the Y-axis, debunking and vindicatory genealogies investigate the rational status of our beliefs, and problematising and rationalising genealogies investigate the background frameworks in which those beliefs are situated. The picture that emerges is of a 2×2 matrix:

¹⁰ Seyla Benhabib goes one step further in claiming that this dual-perspectival structure is the key characteristic that distinguishes critical theory writ large from all other theoretico-normative enterprises. See Benhabib, Seyla. 1986. *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

¹¹ See Brandom, Robert. 2019a. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2015. 'Conceptual Genealogy for Analytic Philosophy'. In *Beyond the Analytic-Continental Divide: Pluralist Philosophy in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Jeffrey A. Bell, Andrew Cutrofello, and Paul M. Livingston. New York, NY: Routledge; and Queloz, Matthieu. 2021. *The Practical Origins of Ideas: Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

	Undermining	Legitimizing
Doxastic	Debunking genealogy	Vindictory genealogy
Background	Problematising genealogy	Rationalising genealogy

Figure 1: *The Two-Dimensional Typology*

With its enriched analytical vocabulary, my proposed typology is better able than the bi- and tripartite typologies to account for the diversity of extant genealogies in the literature and to organise them in such a way as to make salient their distinctive features, similarities, and differences. In so doing, it is also able to rectify the confusions which presently permeate the literature.¹²

Finally, while there are genealogies which straddle the boundaries of my typology, it is not the purpose of this chapter to present an exhaustive conceptual analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions a genealogy must exhibit to count as an instance of one of the quadrants of the typology – even though I do think that my typology does a better job of tracing the contours of the literature on genealogy than the existing typologies we have to work with – nor is it an exercise in philosophical housekeeping. I instead conceive of this chapter as an instance of what Laura Valentini calls “conceptual cartography”.¹³ Typologies are not just ways of ‘carving nature at the joints’ as philosophers are so fond of saying. Whatever else they may be or do, typologies are also maps that help us to navigate a particular domain of inquiry. But the accuracy of the typology, the validity of the classifications, and the nature of the relations between them are all determined relative not to any essential shared features of the items in question, but to the investigative and practical purposes we manifest in considering the features of some set of objects as relevantly similar at all. In the present case, my investigative purpose is to clarify the problems facing genealogy and its philosophical prospects. It is in this sense that I do not conceive of my two-dimensional

¹² Craig also outlines a two-dimensional typology in which some genealogies are also *explanatory* – insofar as they “account[...] for the existence of whatever it is they vindicate or subvert” – while others are not. The issue with his proposal is that *all* genealogies seem to me to explain their objects of investigation to some degree; indeed, it is precisely their explanatory force that serves as the fulcrum upon which their philosophical significance hinges and which distinguishes them from mere historical speculation. Craig, 2007, 182.

¹³ Valentini, Laura. 2012. ‘Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map’. *Philosophy Compass* 7 (9): 655. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2012.00500.x>.

typology as tracking differences in *kind*, but rather simply as a map to help us negotiate unfamiliar philosophical terrain.

2.2 Doxastic Genealogies

Debunking and vindicatory genealogies constitute the two halves of the bipartite typology. While they are undertaken in pursuit of opposing normative objectives, they nevertheless both examine the ground-level epistemic statuses of our beliefs. Debunking and vindicatory genealogies face two objections: the genetic fallacy objection and the self-defeat objection. Both objections can be defused (with varying levels of success and at varying philosophical cost) when appropriately qualified.

Both debunking and vindicatory genealogies prompt us to revise our beliefs by providing accounts of their histories. In the former case, the historical story aims to undermine the epistemic standing of the belief while the historical story told in the latter case aims to legitimate the belief. This is typically achieved by showing, in the debunking case, that the process by which we came to hold the belief is epistemically unreliable or, in the vindicatory case, that our believing it serves some practical purpose. Both debunking and vindicatory genealogies make substantive claims about what we ought to believe or about the attitudes we ought to adopt towards our beliefs. It is in this sense that debunking and vindicatory genealogies are doxastic.

While exhibiting important similarities, debunking and vindicatory genealogies arrive at their intended conclusions on the basis of distinct argumentative mechanisms. As discussed in Sections 1.3.1.1 and 1.3.1.2, debunking genealogies typically attempt to achieve their undermining objective by showing that the belief in question is the result of what Sharon Street, Guy Kahane, and Hanno Sauer call an “off-track process”.¹⁴ An off-track belief-forming process is a belief-forming process which does not reliably track the truth of the matter. Two examples of debunking genealogy which exhibit this reliance on unreliability particularly clearly are evolutionary debunking arguments and ideology as false consciousness. Evolutionary debunking arguments, a subspecies of debunking genealogies, contend that moral beliefs which depend on

¹⁴ Street, Sharon. 2006. ‘A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value’. *Philosophical Studies* 127 (1): 109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-005-1726-6>; Kahane, Guy. 2011. ‘Evolutionary Debunking Arguments’. *Noûs* 45 (1): 105. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2010.00770.x>; Sauer, Hanno. 2018. *Debunking Arguments in Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 32-3. While she does not use the term “off-track”, the same idea can also be found in Rini, Regina A. 2016. ‘Debunking Debunking: A Regress Challenge for Psychological Threats to Moral Judgment’. *Philosophical Studies* 173 (3): 677. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-015-0513-2>.

our moral intuitions do not track the moral truth because our moral intuitions are the products of natural selective pressures which are sensitive to the exigencies of survival and the propagation of our genes, not to moral truths.¹⁵ We thus have reason to believe that our moral beliefs do not track the moral truth as it would push the limits of plausibility to suggest that we just happened to arrive at it by chance. Indeed, just think of how frequently we arrive at conflicting moral beliefs on the basis of our moral intuitions. Similarly, ideology as false consciousness contends that our beliefs systematically fail to track truths about the nature of society due to the distorting influence of our social position relative to some material social structure such as capitalist production, the gendered division of labour, and a racially stratified social hierarchy.¹⁶ As in all cases of debunking genealogy, both evolutionary debunking arguments and ideology as false consciousness leverage the histories of our beliefs to argue that they lack rational warrant, the consequence being that we are obliged to lower our credence in them.

Vindicatory genealogies attempt to legitimate our beliefs in an altogether different manner.¹⁷ Rather than showing our beliefs to be the result of an on-track belief forming process – although doing so would also obviously function as a (non-genealogical) vindication of a belief's rational standing – vindicatory genealogies attempt to reveal the needs our beliefs satisfy and the practices they serve to support.¹⁸ As the

¹⁵ This argument depends, of course, on the truth of moral realism for its force, but the point it makes explicit about the reliability of our moral faculties should nonetheless be clear. See Sauer, 2018, 54.

¹⁶ Ideology conceived as false consciousness should not be confused with ideology conceived as hegemony, the latter of which bears a much greater similarity to problematising genealogy due to its attention to the influence ideology exerts over the standards of assessment against which our beliefs about society are judged. See Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. London, UK: Lawrence and Wishart. 220-1.

¹⁷ Alongside Williams' *Truth and Truthfulness*, Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, and Pettit's *The Birth of Ethics*, additional examples of vindicatory genealogy include Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Ch. 5: The Genealogy of Testimonial Injustice; Hannon, Michael. 2013. 'The Practical Origins of Epistemic Contextualism'. *Erkenntnis* 78 (4): 899–919. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-012-9426-z>; Hannon, Michael. 2015. 'The Universal Core of Knowledge'. *Synthese* 192 (3): 769–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-014-0587-y>; Hannon, Michael. 2019. *What's the Point of Knowledge? A Function-First Epistemology*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Kusch, Martin, and Robin McKenna. 2018. 'The Genealogy of Relativism and Absolutism'. In *Metaepistemology: Realism and Anti-Realism*, edited by Christos Kyriacou and Robin McKenna. Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93369-6_10; Lewis, David. 2002. *Convention: A Philosophical Study*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell; Lotter, Maria-Sibylla. 2012. *Scham, Schuld, Verantwortung: über die kulturellen Grundlagen der Moral*. Berlin, DE: Suhrkamp Verlag; Reynolds, Steven L. 2017. *Knowledge as Acceptable Testimony*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Simpson, Thomas. 2012. 'What Is Trust?' *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93 (4): 550–69. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0114.2012.01438.x>; Simpson, Thomas. 2023. *Trust: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Skinner, Quentin. 1997. *Liberty before Liberalism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139171274>; and Skinner, Quentin. 2009. 'A Genealogy of the Modern State: British Academy Lecture'. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 162: 324–70. <https://doi.org/10.5871/bacad/9780197264584.003.0011>.

¹⁸ See Williams, 2002a, 31-5 and Queloz, 2021, 5-6.

story goes, if it can be shown that a belief and its attendant practices satisfy some genuine human need, then, because it serves a functionally necessary role in facilitating the achievement of some end we endorse, the belief in question is to that extent vindicated. The specifically *historical* component of a vindicatory genealogy is introduced through a heuristic device: the state of nature.¹⁹ Williams, for instance, deploys an (imaginary) state of nature argument to vindicate what he calls the two virtues of truthfulness: Sincerity and Accuracy.²⁰ The state of nature he defines is populated with beings organised in small groups with minimally assumed needs for communication and cooperation. The virtues of truthfulness would emerge, so he contends, in order to meet those needs given equally minimal assumptions about the facts of human psychology and sociology. Williams' argument is that the virtues of truthfulness that would emerge in the state of nature are functionally identical to the norms surrounding our actual conception of truthfulness, meaning that we can assert the counterfactual claim that even if we *hadn't* developed the virtues of truthfulness we actually did, we *would* have developed ones that served the same functions. Our *actual* virtues of truthfulness are thereby shown to be genuinely responsive to some basic human needs found in all human societies. As we derive some benefit from them, they are to that extent legitimated.

2.3 Two Objections

Having briefly elaborated debunking and vindicatory genealogies (which are assumed to be the only forms of genealogy according to the bipartite typology), we can now examine the two main objections levelled against genealogy. As I will show, these objections are far less successful once we have a proper view of the diversity of genealogies which populate the literature and recognise that some are not concerned with the rational status of our beliefs at all but rather with the background frameworks within which things are rendered intelligible as the possible objects of belief in the first place.

¹⁹ Cf. vindicatory genealogy and the classic state of nature stories found in Hobbes, Thomas. 2017. *Leviathan*. Edited by Christopher Brooke. London, UK: Penguin Books; Locke, John. 2003. *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Edited by Ian Shapiro. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press; Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1984. *A Discourse on Inequality*. Edited by Maurice Cranston. London, UK: Penguin Books; and Nozick, Robert. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

²⁰ See Williams, 2002a, Ch. 3: The State of Nature: A Rough Guide. See also. Ch. 5: Sincerity: Lying and Other Styles of Deceit and Ch. 6: Accuracy: A Sense of Reality.

2.3.1 The Genetic Fallacy Objection

The genetic fallacy has been formulated in a variety of ways over the past one hundred years.²¹ As it is most commonly understood today, one commits the genetic fallacy by drawing conclusions about the veracity of a belief on the basis of facts about its history. Such reasoning is (ostensibly) fallacious because the origin or process of development of a belief (ostensibly) has no bearing on its truth or falsity. Because there are no logical relations between the two sets of propositions at stake, the genetic fallacy is, like an *ad hominem*, a fallacy of *irrelevance*. As should already be clear, the kinds of beliefs ruled out from holding legitimate evidential purport in the assessment of a claim are those about the *history* of the claim. The genetic fallacy is hence, according to Margaret Crouch, “the expression of a rule regarding the kind of information that can count as evidence for or against a claim”.²²

The genetic fallacy is obviously correct in a number of cases. If, for instance, a genealogical investigation into a belief *P* (where *P* is the belief ‘there is a plane flying overhead right now’) reveals that I believe *P* only because, unbeknown to me, someone had slipped a large dose of hallucinogenic drugs into my coffee, I would seem to have reason to give up my belief that *P* because beliefs formed under the influence of hallucinogens are notoriously unreliable. Such an investigation, on the basis of the process by which the belief is formed, seems to show that the evidential relation between the world and my cognitive state is unable to support continued endorsement of the belief. The issue with this genealogical story is that even if the grounds on which I base my belief that *P* do not reliably track the truth, *P* may still be true since the facts in virtue of which *P* is true may nevertheless obtain. This means that should a debunking or vindicatory genealogy claim to show that our beliefs are true or false, then it is indeed fallacious and the genetic fallacy objection is successful.

The genetic fallacy objection can, however, be circumvented in two ways. Firstly, we can simply modify our expectations about the kinds of claims debunking and vindicatory genealogies are able to make.

²¹ See Cohen, Morris R., and Ernest Nagel. 1934. *An Introduction to Logic and Scientific Method*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World. 388-90; Copi, Irving. 1961. *Introduction to Logic*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Macmillan. 54-7; Engel, S. Morris. 1994. *With Good Reason: An Introduction to Informal Fallacies*. 5th ed. New York, NY: Bedford/St. Martin's. 198; Goudge, T. A. 1961. ‘The Genetic Fallacy’. *Synthese* 13 (1): 41–48. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00485935>; and Salmon, Wesley. 1973. *Logic*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. 11-2.

²² Crouch, Margaret A. 1993. ‘A “Limited” Defense of the Genetic Fallacy’. *Metaphilosophy* 24 (3): 235. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9973.1993.tb00900.x>.

Doing just that, Sauer claims that debunking arguments, of which debunking genealogies are a subset, “do not show their target beliefs to be false, but rather undermine the justification a subject may have for holding them”.²³ On this understanding, debunking genealogies do not provide definitive reason to think that a belief is *false*, but they do provide reason to think that the *justification* for holding it is bunk. As Sauer continues, “because debunking arguments are a type of undercutting defeat rather than a direct attack against the truth of a proposition, debunking ... arguments are essentially about moving the burden of proof around”.²⁴ And while undermining the justifications for a belief may not be as argumentatively powerful as showing it to be false, an argument able to shift the burden of proof around is still a valuable instrument to have in our philosophical toolkit. The same considerations hold, *mutatis mutandis*, for vindicatory genealogy.²⁵

The second way that the genetic fallacy objection can be defused is by turning to causal accounts of knowledge. Causal accounts of knowledge contend that a belief satisfies the justification condition on knowledge if it is the result of a chain of causation leading back to the state of affairs making the belief true. Since they rely on facts about the history of our beliefs to determine their justifiability, this means that causal accounts of knowledge are a form of genetic argument. However, even if it turns out that causal accounts of knowledge are implausible, they are anything but fallacious. For instance, if my belief that *P* can be traced back to the vibrations in the air caused by the plane’s engines reaching my eardrums, activating my vestibulocochlear nerve, and transmitting electrical impulses to the auditory cortex of my brain, then the belief is justified and hence an item of knowledge. Indeed, it is precisely the history of my belief which establishes the relation between the propositional content of the belief and the state of affairs whose obtaining is something to be believed. It is that relation which locks my having the belief onto the truth of the state of affairs it is about.

However, just as our beliefs’ causal histories ensure that they track the truth of a particular state of affairs, there are also cases in which one’s beliefs are, as Kevin Klement puts it, “the result of a chain of causation involving a state of affairs making [the belief] false”.²⁶ Such processes, which we might call *truth-*

²³ Sauer, 2018, 29.

²⁴ Sauer, 2018, 214.

²⁵ Williams, it is worth noting, insulates his vindicatory genealogy of Sincerity and Accuracy by highlighting the functional contributions they make to ends we reflectively endorse rather than their veracity or justifiability. Their vindication therefore consists in their functional necessity rather than their normative value.

²⁶ Klement, Kevin C. 2002. ‘When Is Genetic Reasoning Not Fallacious?’ *Argumentation* 16 (4): 388. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021132731699>.

averse, provide grounds for claiming not just that a belief is unjustified, but that it is *false*. Although it is (thankfully) true, as Klement continues, that “our cognitive abilities are not set up in such a way that it is very often the case that a certain state of affairs can *cause* us to believe in a contrary state of affairs” in most normal cases of the perception of medium-sized dry goods, it is less clear that this is the case in other important contexts.²⁷ Accounts of ideology as false consciousness, for instance, typically hinge on the claim that we erroneously attribute an objective character to elements of the social world precisely because our beliefs about them are the normal result of pathologies in the material systems of which they are reflections.²⁸ Both the truth-tracking and truth-averse cases show that while there are indeed cases in which the source of a claim is irrelevant to the assessment of its veracity, genealogical reasoning, as Crouch claims, cannot be said to be fallacious “*simply* because it is about the source of the claim [my emphasis]”.²⁹

While debunking and vindictory genealogies are by no means immune to the genetic fallacy objection, that is a far cry from the categorical claim that they should be dismissed out of hand as fallacious instances of unsound reasoning. While some genealogies may indeed be fallacious, their fallaciousness will be a result of the specifics of their formulation, not merely their membership of a type.

2.3.2 The Self-Defeat Objection

Defusing the genetic fallacy objection leads us directly to a second, less tractable problem. If we are able to show that a belief is the result of an unreliable belief-forming process, the question that must now be answered is how reliable our determination of unreliability is. For if it turns out that the beliefs we have about our belief-forming processes are themselves the result of unreliable belief-forming processes, then, by its own lights, the genealogy’s own justificatory status lapses. This raises the threat of self-defeat since the genealogist threatens to undermine the foundations of her own argument by unwittingly implicating

²⁷ Klement, 2002, 388.

²⁸ See *GI*. Similarly, Sigmund Freud contends that our beliefs about ourselves are the result of a causal process beginning in childhood and culminating in the resolution of the Family Romance which, through psychological inversions and projects, results in beliefs that are false as a necessary condition on maintaining the integrity of the ego in the face of childhood trauma. See Freud, Sigmund. 1959. ‘Family Romances’. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. 9: Jensen’s ‘Gradiva’, and Other Works (1906-1908)*, edited by James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson. London, UK: Hogarth Press.

²⁹ Crouch, 1993, 239. It’s worth noting that an appropriately modified version of this strategy is not available to the vindictory genealogist since vindictory genealogies rely on counterfactual, imaginary histories, meaning that there is no causal process in which to ground itself *ex hypothesi*. Vindictory genealogies thus only deal in questions of justification.

either the standards against which her genealogy is to be assessed or the assumptions on which it is based. Whereas the genetic fallacy objection raises an external concern about the relevance of a belief's history for its assessment on the basis of independent considerations of evidential purport, the self-defeat objection relates to genealogy's logical structure, its entailments, and its presuppositions.

The self-defeat objection is typically formulated in one of two ways: as an epistemic objection and as an objection relating to the normative standards genealogy assumes.³⁰ Regarding the former, as discussed in Section 1.3.1.2, Amia Srinivasan points out that debunking genealogies hinge on being able to accurately distinguish between belief-forming processes with reliably track (or avoid) the truth from those which do so unreliably.³¹ As presaged in Section 1.3.2, this leads to a dilemma. On the one hand, we risk begging the question against the genealogical sceptic. The distinction between reliable and unreliable belief-forming processes cannot be determined except in reference to the beliefs they generate since it is precisely their patterns of veracity which decides if the process which generated them is reliable.³² This is, however, exactly the issue at stake. On the other hand, should it be claimed that we can determine the reliability of belief-forming processes through a special method then we risk embarking on a regress since doing so assumes that the special method has itself been determined to be reliable. The reliability of the special method would also presumably have to be determined by some further method whose own reliability must be determined, and so on *ad infinitum*. It thus seems that debunking genealogy cuts its epistemic foundations out from beneath itself.

Understood as an objection relating to genealogy's normative standards, the self-defeat objection is most influentially articulated by Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser in their critiques of Foucault.

³⁰ Alisdair MacIntyre also formulates what he calls a distinctively “metaphysical” form of genealogical self-defeat on the basis of the assumed relationship between speaker and audience. I have not included discussion of it here because it is not clear to me how distinct it is from the normative account of self-defeat outlined by Habermas and Fraser since both accounts purchase their argumentative leverage in reference to the standards of assessment against which a genealogy is to be evaluated. Robert Brandom also introduces a novel account of semantic self-defeat which we shall examine in Section 2.6. See MacIntyre, Alisdair. 1990. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. 45-6.

³¹ See Srinivasan, Amia. 2015. ‘The Archimedean Urge’. *Philosophical Perspectives* 29 (1): 330. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12068> and Srinivasan, Amia. 2019. ‘Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking’. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119 (2): 132. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/a0z009>. For a response to this objection, see Leiter, Brian. 2023. ‘On the Relevance of Etiology to Justification (with Reference to Marx and Nietzsche)’. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 47: 157–69. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp202311244>.

³² See Srinivasan, 2019, 133-4. Cf. Goodman, Nelson. 1983. *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. 4th ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 64.

Habermas contends that Foucault can only ground the critical force of his genealogies “by not thinking genealogically about his *own* genealogical historiography”.³³ Similarly, Fraser argues that Foucault makes use of genealogy as a critical methodology in an attempt to be “both politically engaged and normatively neutral” yet nevertheless “sometimes appears not to have suspended the liberal norms [of legitimacy and illegitimacy] after all but, rather, to be presupposing them”.³⁴ Foucault’s genealogies, it is claimed, either do not have the normative resources required for a politically efficacious critique or rely on the very norms he claims to have suspended. The underlying dilemma is that Foucault can avoid the self-defeat objection, but only at a high cost to his broader critical project, namely by reducing genealogy to a heuristic device unable to normatively motivate critical social transformation. As I argue in Section 2.6 however, getting a clearer view of the targets of Foucault’s genealogies and the form of their normative ambitions suggests that Habermas’ and Fraser’s articulation of the self-defeat objection may indeed be applicable to some genealogies in the literature, they are wide of the mark as objections to Foucault.³⁵

It’s worth noting at this point that the self-defeat objection applies only to the debunking half of the bipartite typology for the simple reason that vindicatory genealogies do not undermine anything at all, let alone their own foundations. Since it is also perfectly possible to defuse genetic fallacy objections levelled

³³ Habermas, Jürgen. 1987. ‘Some Questions Concerning the Theory of Power: Foucault Again’. In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 269. See also Habermas, Jürgen. 1986. ‘Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present’. In *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, edited by David Couzens Hoy. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

³⁴ Fraser, Nancy. 1989. ‘Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions’. In *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 19. See also Fraser, Nancy. 1983. ‘Foucault’s Body Language: A Posthumanist Political Rhetoric?’ *Salmagundi*, no. 61: 55–70 and Fraser, Nancy. 1985. ‘Michel Foucault: A “Young Conservative”?’ *Ethics* 96 (1): 165–84. <https://doi.org/10.1086/292729>.

³⁵ For an overview of the relationship between Foucault’s critical project and broadly Habermasian critical theory, see Allen, Amy. 2009. ‘Discourse, Power, and Subjectivation: The Foucault/Habermas Debate Reconsidered’. *The Philosophical Forum* 40 (1): 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9191.2008.00314.x>; Ashenden, Samantha, and David Owen, eds. 1999. *Foucault Contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory*. London, UK: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446221822>; Han, Béatrice. 2002. *Foucault’s Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; and Han-Pile, Béatrice. 2016. ‘Foucault, Normativity and Critique as a Practice of the Self’. *Continental Philosophy Review* 49 (1): 85–101. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-015-9360-2>; Hanssen, Beatrice. 2004. ‘Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: Habermas and Foucault’. In *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, edited by Fred Rush. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521816602>; Hoy, David Couzens, ed. 1991. *Foucault: A Critical Reader*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell; Kelly, Michael, ed. 1994. *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; and Visker, Rudi. 1995. *Michel Foucault: Genealogy as Critique*. Translated by Chris Turner. London, UK: Verso.

against vindictory genealogies – and since they are not, I think, victim to the conflation which otherwise pervade the literature – I will set consideration of them aside for now.

2.4 Background Frameworks

Some readers are likely to have noticed a perspicuous lacuna in the argument presented thus far as one of the most important instances of genealogy (both historically and conceptually) has yet to figure in my discussion. While genealogies have been made use of throughout the history of philosophy, Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* stands as the first example of genealogy used as an explicitly theorised philosophical methodology. Nietzsche's *Genealogy* aims to leverage the history and development of Christian morality in an attempt to undermine Christian moral values by revealing the supposedly real reasons underlying our endorsement of them. We do not, according to Nietzsche, believe in the virtues of humility, charity, or compassion because they are reflections of the divine in man or a reasoned glimpse upon objective moral norms, but because, through a complex series of interactions between the *ressentiment* of slaves towards their masters, the infliction of pain as a credit repayment device, and the will to power of ascetic priests, the weak developed an ideological system which fettered the strong in order to satisfy their psycho-physiological need for revenge. Since we would have believed *whichever* moral values would have served that function, our moral beliefs do not reliably track the truth of the matter. This means that whichever justifications we previously held for them are subject to an undercutting defeater. The *Genealogy* is, on this construal, an archetypical debunking genealogy.

However, this does not tell the whole story. Nietzsche makes it clear in the *Preface* that he is not – or at least not primarily – interested in the rational or justificatory status of our moral beliefs because what “we stand in need of [is] a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values itself should first of all be called into question*” (*GM* P:6).³⁶ Since our moral beliefs may be valuable for us for any number of reasons (such as helping to stave off “suicidal nihilism” [*GM* III:28] to mention just one) regardless of whether or not they

³⁶ See also Prescott-Couch, Alexander. 2023. ‘Genealogy beyond Debunking’. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 47:171–94. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp20231194> and Geuss, Raymond. 1997. ‘Nietzsche and Morality’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0378.00024>.

are justified, this suggests that while the unreliability argument may indeed be part of the *Genealogy's* story, it is by no means all of it.³⁷

Yet Nietzsche's point is not merely that the practical consequences of our beliefs require theorising. While he certainly does devote considerable attention to an analysis of the effects that certain patterns of adherence to certain moral values have on the structure of social relations, this rests on his accounts of physiological types, historical 'forces', and the will to power. The specifically *genealogical* component of his analysis is instead to be found in his attempt to shake us out of the very normative framework in which Christian morality is recognisable as a system of values. With the slavish, negativistic, other-oriented 'good/evil' evaluative framework having supplanted the positive, subject-oriented 'good/bad' system previously held by the masters, it is not sufficient, Nietzsche claims, merely to renounce or amend our moral beliefs because subscription to the framework in which they are rendered intelligible *as* moral beliefs is independent of endorsement of the moral beliefs themselves.³⁸ But if at least part of the *Genealogy* is not concerned with our beliefs at all, instead targeting the normative framework in which our moral beliefs are couched, then understanding Nietzsche as straightforwardly presenting a debunking genealogy is to misread a crucial aspect of his project since debunking genealogy does not have the conceptual resources to account for it.³⁹

³⁷ It is precisely this Nietzschean insight which compels Freud to examine the positive value that self-delusion and the repression of traumatic truths can yield in the constitution of a coherent psyche. See Butler, 2006, 98-9; Honneth, Axel. 2004. 'A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory'. In *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, edited by Fred Rush. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 355.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521816602.014>; and Leiter, Brian. 2004. 'The Hermeneutics of Suspicion: Recovering Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud'. In *The Future for Philosophy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

³⁸ Christian morality has, as Nietzsche puts it, kept us "stuck in a cage, imprisoned among all kinds of awful concepts". Its genealogical investigation is, he claims, what will free us from it. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1997. *Twilight of the Idols: Or, How to Philosophise with a Hammer*. Translated by Richard Polt. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company. Improvers, §2. Cf. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1997. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Edited by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. §192 and Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2001. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Edited by Bernard Williams. Translated by Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian Del Caro. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. II:99, III:122, and III:146.

³⁹ For analysis of genealogies which target our conceptual resources rather than our beliefs, see Queloz, Matthieu. 2023. 'Debunking Concepts'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 47: 195–225. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp2023111347> and Plunkett, David. 2016. 'Conceptual History, Conceptual Ethics, and the Aims of Inquiry: A Framework for Thinking about the Relevance of the History/Genealogy of Concepts to Normative Inquiry'. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 3 (2). <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0003.002>.

To fully understand the inadequacy of the present construal of the category of debunking genealogy, we must turn to Foucault and, perhaps unusually, to Ludwig Wittgenstein.⁴⁰ Like Nietzsche before him, Foucault is unconcerned with the rational status of our beliefs, still less still with the identification of a “primordial truth fully adequate to its nature”.⁴¹ Instead, the overarching question at the heart of his critical project is, as Tuomo Tuusala puts it, “to enable us to see that which is too close and too much on the surface of what we do, think, and say for us to ordinarily accord any attention to it”.⁴² Foucault calls the presuppositions which suffuse our action, thought, and language the “historical *a priori*”, a historicised version of Kant’s bounds of sense.⁴³ Foucault’s historical *a priori* can be usefully illuminated through Wittgenstein’s contention that there exists a fixed background in our linguistic practices which is “not consciously arrived at ... by following a particular line of thought, but ... is anchored in all [one’s] *questions and answers*, so anchored that [one] cannot touch it” (*OC* §103). This background is itself not subject to assessments of truth and falsity as it is “the background against which [we] distinguish between true and false” (*OC* §94). Yet rather than pushing the sceptical line that might be expected at the suggestion that the foundations of our linguistic practices are not consciously arrived at, Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasises

⁴⁰ For an interesting treatment of Wittgenstein’s resemblance to Nietzsche and Foucault, see Owen, David. 2001. ‘Wittgenstein and Genealogy’. *SATS – Northern European Journal of Philosophy* 2 (2): 5–29. <https://doi.org/10.1515/SATS.2001.5> and Owen, David. 2002. ‘Criticism and Captivity: On Genealogy and Critical Theory’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2): 216–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0378.00158>. See also Sen, Amartya. 2003. ‘Sraffa, Wittgenstein, and Gramsci’. *Journal of Economic Literature* 41 (4): 1240–55. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jel.41.4.1240>.

⁴¹ Foucault, Michel. 1984a. ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’. In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books. 78.

⁴² Tuusala, Tuomo. 2017. ‘Overcoming “The Present Limits of the Necessary”’: Foucault’s Conception of a Critique’. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 55 (S1): 14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12224>. See also Foucault, Michel. 2018. ‘The Analytic Philosophy of Politics’. Translated by Giovanni Mascaretti. *Foucault Studies*, no. 24: 192. <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i24.5532>; Tuusala, Tuomo. 2024. *Power and Freedom in the Space of Reasons: Elaborating Foucault’s Pragmatism*. New York, NY: Routledge; and Bremner, Sabina Vaccarino, and Chloé De Canson. 2025. ‘Ideology as Relativised *A Priori*: On the Mind’s Relation to the Social World’. *Political Philosophy* 2 (1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/pp.16337>.

⁴³ Foucault, Michel. 2001. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Routledge. xxiii. See also Foucault, 2001, xi and 172; Foucault, Michel. 2020. ‘Interview with Madeleine Chapsal’. Translated by Mark G. E. Kelly. *Journal of Continental Philosophy* 1 (1): 32. <https://doi.org/10.5840/jcp2020876>; and Tuusala, Tuomo. 2015. ‘Keeping It Implicit: A Defense of Foucault’s Archaeology of Knowledge’. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (4): 658. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2015.29>. Cf. Peter Strawson’s claim that Kant’s project is to identify the “limits to what we can conceive of, or make intelligible to ourselves, as a possible general structure of experience”. Strawson, P. F. 1966. *The Bounds of Sense: An Essay on Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*. London, UK: Routledge. 15.

that this system of pre-reflectively accepted presuppositions which defines the language games in which we think and have our being

is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life (*OC* §105).

Like Foucault, Wittgenstein indicates here that he is concerned to articulate the structure of the medium through which linguistic activity becomes conceivable as distinctively discursive, not the rational status of the individual propositions which populate it. Following Wittgenstein, we might call these presuppositions our *background frameworks*.

While providing a detailed account of the nature of our background frameworks is a topic unto itself, it will nevertheless do us well to briefly outline how they ought to be regarded for present purposes. The literature is rich with accounts of the various background considerations in and through which we undertake discursive activity.⁴⁴ One common way of thinking about background frameworks is as the conceptual resources in terms of which our beliefs are formulated. On this picture, our background frameworks are the hermeneutical tools which structure which aspects of the world, each other, and ourselves are made salient to analysis and which are obscured from view. Yet while the conceptual resources in terms of which we formulate belief may indeed be constituents of our background frameworks, they can be comprised by any number of different things, beliefs included. For the idea is not simply that debunking and vindicatory genealogies examine the epistemic while Nietzsche and Foucault concern themselves with the conceptual. The relevant distinction is more general and more permissive, and the resulting conception

⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, Miranda Fricker, John Searle, and Robert Stalnaker, to name just a few, present accounts of the assumed background propositions, concepts, institutions, capacities, and practices respectively which enable intelligible communication and constitute our sense of reality. See Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977a. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 164. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507>; Fricker, 2007, Ch. 7: Hermeneutical Injustice; Searle, John R. 1983. *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 143. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139173452>; Stalnaker, Robert. 1970. 'Pragmatics'. *Synthese* 22 (1–2): 272–89. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00413603>; Stalnaker, Robert. 1999. 'Pragmatic Presuppositions'. In *Context and Content*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198237073.003.0003>; and Stalnaker, Robert. 2002. 'Common Ground'. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25 (5–6): 701–21. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1020867916902>. See also Deer, Cécile. 2012. 'Doxa'. In *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, edited by Michael Grenfell, 2nd ed. London, UK: Routledge; Hacking, Ian. 2002b. 'Historical Ontology'. In *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Stanley, Jason. 2004. 'On the Linguistic Basis for Contextualism'. *Philosophical Studies* 119 (1–2): 119–46. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:PHIL.0000029353.14987.34>; and van Fraassen, Bas. 1968. 'Presupposition, Implication, and Self-Reference'. *The Journal of Philosophy* 65 (5): 136–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2024557>.

more pluralistic. Our background frameworks should instead be thought of as the system of fixed points in our discursive practices, whatever collection of items must be presupposed for some discursive practice to be intelligible. They are hence distinguished by their *fixity*, their liability to assessment and correction. As Wittgenstein notes,

I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility (*OC* §152).⁴⁵

This enables us to make better sense of Nietzsche's and Foucault's genealogical projects. For rather than simply being interested in genealogising our concepts, they aim to identify the unarticulated fixed points around which our discursive practices revolve and to understand why we happened to end up with the fixed points we have. We can hence remain agnostic towards whether background frameworks are epistemic, conceptual, practical, or what have you. All that matters is the orienting role they play in discursive activity.

Wittgenstein's relevance for Foucault's and Nietzsche's use of genealogy becomes clear when we consider how the background frameworks in which our linguistic activity inheres and against which it stands in relief are constituted. Whereas Wittgenstein fails to see beyond the brute facticity of our background frameworks because he lacks the historical tools to analyse their constitution, the thread running through Foucault's oeuvre is the concerted attempt to uncover how our background frameworks have been constructed through historically-specific "laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated, or described within it, and for the relations that are affirmed or denied in it".⁴⁶ Foucault's objective is hence to develop an analysis of the specific historical "conditions that had to be met for it to be possible to hold a discourse", that is, as Tiisala puts it, to understand the "norms that not only govern how we use concepts in thought and action but, crucially, also *constitute* a space of semantic possibilities that defines what kinds of contents we can so much as recognise as possible candidates to entertain as our thoughts in the present".⁴⁷ Foucault utilises genealogy not, in other words, to undermine our existing

⁴⁵ See also *OC* §§207-10.

⁴⁶ Foucault, Michel. 2002. *Archaeology of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Routledge. See also Brady, John C. 2020. 'Frege and Foucault on the Conditions of Thought'. *Epoché*, March 2020. <https://epochemagazine.org/29/frege-foucault-on-the-conditions-of-thought/>.

⁴⁷ Foucault, Michel. 2008. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-79*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Translated by Graham Burchell. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 36 and Tiisala, 2017, 8. Where Kant and Habermas (among others) see eternal, a priori conditions of discursivity, Nietzsche and Foucault only see historical

assignments of truth and falsity so as to change our beliefs, but to make visible what can intelligibly appear to us, as Ian Hacking puts it, “as a candidate for being true-or-false” in the first place.⁴⁸ The key point is that neither Foucault nor Nietzsche are concerned to identify which of our beliefs are true and which false, or which are justified and which aren’t, but rather with how to limn the present boundaries of intelligibility.

2.5 Problematising Genealogy and the Tripartite Typology

It should be clear at this point that the construal of debunking genealogy outlined in Section 2.2 is not a suitable account of some of the most textually significant and philosophically compelling instances of genealogy. However, the cause of this unsuitability is not the result of a deficient characterisation of debunking genealogy that could be honed through additional qualification and specification, but rather due to the limitations of the bipartite typology in which both debunking and vindicatory genealogies are situated. The bipartite typology assumed thus far organises debunking and vindicatory genealogies according to their normative objectives, viz. undermining or legitimating our beliefs. Yet neither Nietzsche nor Foucault are primarily interested in our beliefs at all. Instead, they are interested in the constitution of the discursive space in which it is possible to imagine certain instances of propositional content as things to be believed. That Nietzsche and Foucault are mischaracterised is hence a result of the bipartite typology itself lacking the conceptual resources to articulate their distinctive purposes.

In response to this lacuna, Allen and Koopman propose a third category of genealogy: *problematising genealogy*.⁴⁹ Unlike debunking genealogy which undermines the rational status of our beliefs, problematising genealogy transforms previously given features of social reality into problems requiring solutions. By highlighting the thoroughgoing contingency of the historical processes which have constituted the

ones. While I’m agnostic towards the question of whether *all* conditions of discourse are historically constituted, there is undoubtedly valuable philosophical work to be done in assessing *which* forms of discursivity might be said to be eternally applicable and which historically variable.

⁴⁸ Hacking, Ian. 2002c. ‘Language, Truth and Reason’. In *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. See also Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 18 and Lightbody, Brian. 2020. ‘Hermeneutics vs. Genealogy: Brandom’s Cloak or Nietzsche’s Quilt?’ *The European Legacy* 25 (6): 646-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2020.1756597>.

⁴⁹ See Allen, 2008, 10; Allen, 2010, 87; and Koopman, 2013, 59. See also Foucault, Michel. 1984b. ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’. In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 343 and Geuss, Raymond. 2002. ‘Genealogy as Critique’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 10 (2): 211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0378.00157>.

background framework in question, problematising genealogy recasts the unreflectively accepted landscape on which linguistic activity plays out into an issue demanding critical investigation. Recognising just how easily we might have engaged with the world differently is the kind of fact which, as Wittgenstein puts it, places one “into a position in which [they] could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which [one is] ... torn away from the *sureness* of the game” (OC §617). By presenting us with a historical narrative about the construction of bourgeois sexuality, the notion of a ‘pre-discursive’ sex, and Christian morality, Foucault, Butler, and Nietzsche each attempt to unsettle our confidence in the aptness of the background frameworks we have until now taken for granted and undermine our sense of the felicity of the judgements articulated in their terms. As Bonnie Sheehey articulates it, problematisation does not “lay[...] down prescriptions, prophecies, or programs for behaviour” but instead “challenges ... familiar systems of thought so as to defamiliarise, problematise, or make them strange”.⁵⁰ Indeed, as Butler puts it, the purpose of a problematising genealogy is not to “evaluate whether its objects ... are good or bad, ... but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself”.⁵¹ We thus might call the confusion above the *debunking/problematising conflation*.

How, then, should we characterise the relationship between the three forms of genealogy we have identified so far? Where debunking and vindicatory genealogies aim to undermine and support our beliefs respectively, Koopman claims that problematising genealogy is normatively “neutral”.⁵² This is because it does not engage in what Sheehey calls “the normatively ambitious work of judgement”.⁵³ Instead, problematising genealogy interrogates why some object of inquiry has been designated as having the potential to hold a rational status at all, thereby rendering it open to analysis when previously it was not. Whether we should endorse or reject the object of analysis is a question problematising genealogy is agnostic

⁵⁰ Sheehey, Bonnie. 2020. ‘Reparative Critique, Care, and the Normativity of Foucauldian Genealogy’. *Angelaki* 25 (5): 71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969725X.2020.1807142>. In a similar vein, Queloz contends that genealogy “helps us break through the veil of familiarity” through which we otherwise relate to many of our concepts, practices, and institutions so that we can identify what Max Horkheimer calls “the human bottom of nonhuman things”. Queloz, 2021, 50 and Horkheimer, Max. 1972. ‘The Latest Attack on Metaphysics’. In *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell. New York, NY: Continuum. 143.

⁵¹ Butler, Judith. 2002. “‘What Is Critique?’ An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue”. In *The Political*, edited by David Ingram. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 214.

⁵² Koopman, 2013, 60. See also Geuss, 2002, 212 and Geuss, Raymond. 2008. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 67-9.

⁵³ Sheehey, 2020, 69.

towards since, as Sakari Säynäjoki and Tiisala note, it “provides no direction to the work of freedom it enables”.⁵⁴

With problematising genealogy construed as normatively neutral, we can now outline the structure of the tripartite typology. Just as the bipartite typology distributes the different forms of genealogy along a normative dimension of analysis, the tripartite typology places debunking, vindicatory, and problematising genealogies along a normative spectrum. Debunking and vindicatory genealogies sit at the poles while problematising genealogy occupies the midpoint.

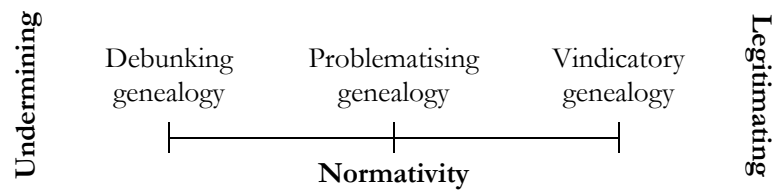


Figure 2: *The Tripartite Typology*

Alongside its ability to account for a swathe of important genealogies, the tripartite typology holds two additional advantages over the bipartite typology. Firstly, the tripartite typology enables us to further refine the applicability of the genetic fallacy and self-defeat objections. Regarding the former, since problematising genealogy does not make determinate claims about the veracity or justificatory status of particular beliefs but rather examines the conditions under which linguistic activity is designated as subject to ascriptions of veracity or justification in the first place, the genetic fallacy does not seem to apply to it at all. Genetic fallacy objections levelled against problematising genealogies hence need not be defused; they simply do not land. Things are trickier regarding the self-defeat objection, however. On the one hand, problematising genealogy does not seem to risk cutting its own foundations out from beneath itself because, being normatively neutral, it does not undermine anything at all. On the other hand, it seems unreasonable to claim, as shall be discussed in further detail in Section 2.8, that attempting to ‘tear us away from the sureness of the game’ is not an attempt to undermine it.

The second advantage of the tripartite typology is that it facilitates analysis of the specifically political import of many genealogies. One of Wittgenstein’s worries is that the backgrounds in which our

⁵⁴ Säynäjoki, Sakari, and Tuomo Tiisala. 2023. ‘Revisable A Priori as a Political Problem: Critique of Constitution in Critical Theory’. *Journal of Social and Political Philosophy* 2 (2): 151. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jssp.2023.0054>. See also Tiisala, 2017, 14-6.

linguistic activity has its being may surreptitiously constrain the possible results of that activity in such a way as to preclude an accurate apprehension of the world. This is because the background frameworks we use may prompt us, as he puts it, to “think[...] that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it” (*PI* §114).⁵⁵ The implication is twofold: first, that there are things we are blind to beyond the horizon of our background frameworks and, second, that we project that horizon onto the world thinking we have discovered it there. Wittgenstein’s worry is precisely that we may mistake our background frameworks, historically specific as they are, for the conditions of possibility of linguistic activity as such.

The deeper problem that problematising genealogy enables us to engage with is that ascribing the status of necessity to a background framework may turn out to merely be a ruse for the effective operation of the forms of power which lace the social world. Foucault (correctly, I think) claims that

Power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. Would power be accepted if it were entirely cynical? For it, secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation. Not only because power imposes secrecy on those whom it dominates, but because it is perhaps just as indispensable to the latter: would they accept it if they did not see it as a mere limit . . . , leaving a measure of freedom – however slight – intact? Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability.⁵⁶

If power must conceal itself lest it be resisted, what better strategy can it pursue than to present itself as an unthinkable background framework in which resistance must itself participate? Imputing necessity to a background framework in this way both renders it unrecognisable as a potential object of resistance and enables it to determine what is conceivable as intelligible resistance to its regime in advance.⁵⁷ The worry, of course, is that the background frameworks we seemingly have no choice but to make use of can be

⁵⁵ See also *PI* §§101-3.

⁵⁶ Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: An Introduction. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 86. See also Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991a. ‘On Symbolic Power’. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John B. Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 163-4. One potential exception to this rule is under fascist regimes in which the public display of power for power’s sake is not only permissible but extolled.

⁵⁷ As we shall examine in Section 4.2.2, necessity’s pragmatic effect on our discursive activity and the function it performs in perpetuating certain forms of social injustice is precisely why instances of ideology typically manifest as the false representation of some state of affairs as natural or necessary. See Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 74 and Stanley, Jason. 2015. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Ch. 4: Language as a Mechanism of Control and Ch. 5: Ideology.

organised so as to deliberately inhibit the formulation of possible forms of resistance and thereby maintain the regimes of power they may conceal.

2.6 The Normativity of Critique and Semantic Self-Defeat

Despite its advantages over the bipartite typology, the tripartite typology runs into two significant problems. The first relates to problematising genealogy's critical force: how should we think about problematising genealogy as a tool of critique if it is normatively neutral? If successful, problematising genealogy shows us that (at least some of) the background frameworks we take to be necessary are in fact historically contingent, that the ways of understanding the world through them are just some among many ways we could understand it. We should be wary, however, of articulating the significance of contingency for genealogy simply in debunking terms. Showing that a background framework has a contingent history may indeed demonstrate that it is not reliably sensitive to the facts of the matter. *Had* a background framework developed differently we *would have* apprehended what we see through it differently. But merely identifying contingency where once we saw necessity does not on its own serve as a reason to adjust our attitudes towards the background framework in question. It is also a contingent fact that I was raised in a liberal household, but it is not clear whether or why that alone should give me reason to revise my attitudes towards liberal political theory.⁵⁸

Rather than normatively obliging us to revise our background frameworks, we should, according to Allen and Koopman, think of problematising genealogy's critical force in terms of its ability to expand the space of discursive possibility – that is, as Sheehy puts it, in terms of its ability to “create[...] ... problems as possible openings for the present work of transformation”.⁵⁹ In revealing just how easily our background frameworks could have been different, we are driven to reimagine how else they might have been – and what other forms they could take in the present. Problematising genealogy's critical import hence lies in the way it carves out new spaces of discursive possibility in which the previously unthinkable can proliferate. As Foucault puts it, the goal of problematising genealogy is to “separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we

⁵⁸ Cf. Knobe, Joshua, and Shaun Nichols. 2008. ‘An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto’. In *Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 11.

⁵⁹ Sheehy, 2020, 68.

are, do, or think. ... It is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom".⁶⁰

This highlights problematising genealogy's most distinctive feature. Problematising genealogy can be thought of as having two faces: one oriented towards the past, the other oriented towards the future. Its past-oriented component reveals the thoroughgoing contingency of our background frameworks by tracing their often arbitrary processes of construction, identifying the particular ways of going on creatures like us living in cultures like ours find natural to go on, and transforming the previously given into problems requiring philosophical attention. Its future-oriented component, on the other hand, opens up the possibility of new ways of going on and delineating new candidates for thought in the discursive space freshly carved out for them. With this distinction in view, we can see, for instance, that the genealogies of Foucault's middle period (such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*) are primarily past-oriented since they investigate the constitution of penalty and bourgeois sexuality as seemingly ubiquitous features of modern society. By comparison, his late work can be seen to be future-oriented given its attention to unstructured ethical experimentation and the new forms of subjectivity such experimentation makes possible. Daniele Lorenzini, Srinivasan, and Dutilh Novaes have more recently referred to this future-oriented aspect of problematising genealogy as "possibilising", "worldmaking", and "genealogical effervescence" respectively.⁶¹ On this construal, problematising genealogy's critical force emerges from the interplay between past- and future-oriented inquiries.

The idea that problematising genealogy has two faces introduces a distinctively open-ended conception of critique. For Foucault, that is by design: it is precisely the fact that ethical experimentation is not, as Butler puts it, "fully determined in advance" which acts as the condition of possibility for the

⁶⁰ Foucault, Michel. 1984c. 'What Is Enlightenment?' In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 46. See also Foucault's remark in the Introduction to *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2*: "But, then, what is philosophy today – philosophical activity, I mean – if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself. In what does it consist, if not in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?" Foucault, Michel. 1984d. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*. Translated by Robert Hurley. London, UK: Viking. 8-9.

⁶¹ Lorenzini, Daniele. 2020. 'On Possibilising Genealogy'. *Inquiry* 67 (7): 2175–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1712227>; Lorenzini, Daniele. 2023. *The Force of Truth: Critique, Genealogy, and Truth-Telling in Michel Foucault*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. Ch. 5: Critique and Possibilising Genealogy; Srinivasan, 2019, 145; and Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2023a. 'Should We Be Genealogically Anxious?: From Anxiety to Epistemic Agency and Critical Resistance'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 47: 126. <https://doi.org/10.5840/msp2023103142>. See also Goodman, Nelson. 1978. *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

autonomous use of an agent's reason in the pursuit of freedom for it is exactly testing the feasibility of new candidates for thought beyond existing forms of intelligibility which, as she continues, resistively "marks the limits to the ordering capacity of the field in question".⁶² This is also why, as mentioned in Section 2.3.2, Habermas' and Fraser's normative articulation of the self-defeat objection does not seem to land as an objection to Foucault's use of problematising genealogy specifically.

Nevertheless, a normatively neutral conception of critique comes at the cost of being able to rationally motivate the adoption of action-guiding principles of conduct. Problematising genealogy thus risks political inefficaciousness. This problem is all the more pressing given that many problematising genealogies aspire to inform concrete political practice. Indeed, it is precisely because there are no normative standards against which proposed candidates for thought can be assessed that commentators such as Jana Sawicki, Nancy Hartsock, and Martha Nussbaum have questioned the usefulness of Foucault's genealogies (and problematising genealogy more generally) for emancipatory politics.⁶³ What resources do we have, they ask, to judge what counts as emancipatory progress and what as reactionary backsliding?⁶⁴

Worse yet, even a normatively neutral account of problematising genealogy's critical force is unable to avoid a *semantic* formulation of the self-defeat objection. Recall that problematising genealogy appeals to normative neutrality to avoid the threat of the self-defeat objection. The thought is that if problematising genealogy resists passing judgement entirely, then it cannot be said to introduce any judgements inconsistent with its own foundations. But even if we grant that undertaking a problematising genealogy does not obligate the adoption of any specific attitudes towards our background frameworks, instead merely aiming to trace the outlines of their historical conditions of possibility, the genealogist is still implicitly committed to at least one claim: that she is, on pain of meaninglessness, making determinate claims *about* something. As Brandom

⁶² Butler, 2002, 220.

⁶³ See Sawicki, Jana. 1994. 'Foucault and Feminism: A Critical Reappraisal'. In *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, edited by Michael Kelly. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; Hartsock, Nancy. 1990. 'Foucault on Power: A Theory of Women?' In *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson. New York, NY: Routledge; and Nussbaum, Martha. 1999. 'The Professor of Parody'. *The New Republic*, 22 February 1999. <https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody>.

⁶⁴ See Forst, Rainer. 2019. 'The Justification of Progress and the Progress of Justification'. In *Justification and Emancipation: The Critical Theory of Rainer Forst*, edited by Amy Allen and Eduardo Mendieta. Penn State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271085715-003> and Honneth, Axel. 2018. 'How to Envision Social Progress Today? On Peter Wagner's *Progress: A Reconstruction*'. *Social Imaginaries* 4 (1): 157–69. <https://doi.org/10.5840/si2018418>. Cf. Allen, Amy. 2017. *The End of Progress: Decolonising the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

puts it, “even the [genealogist] ... offer[s] contentful *accounts* of our doings (performances and attitudes), accounts that aim to satisfy the distinctive standards of intelligibility, adequacy, and correctness to which they hold themselves”.⁶⁵ This means that for the genealogist to count as saying anything determinately contentful about our background frameworks at all she must be committed to at least some standards of assessment against which her claims can be evaluated, in turn meaning that she cannot so easily avoid the threat of self-defeat just by pruning her normative ambitions. Whether or not the genealogist explicitly acknowledges those normative commitments is inconsequential: whatever else it may be, problematising genealogy is not ‘neutral’.

2.7 Rationalising Genealogy

How might we proceed from here? If it turns out that problematising genealogy is not normatively neutral after all, what becomes of it as a tool in our critical arsenal? What becomes of the tripartite typology? And can the self-defeat objection be circumvented in some other way? There is, I think, an interesting route out of this philosophical quagmire illuminated by recent work by Brandom, Dutilh Novaes, and Queloz. Their contributions trace the outline of what I think should be considered a distinct form of genealogy which promises to supplement the ‘direction’ presently missing from problematising genealogy while preserving the space for experimentation characteristic of its form of critique.

We can begin by explicating part of Brandom’s expansive Hegelian vision of the determination of conceptual content presented in *A Spirit of Trust*.⁶⁶ One of the central axes of his account is what he calls “retrospective recollective rational reconstruction”.⁶⁷ We can, according to Terry Pinkard, think of this as “a kind of rationalist genealogy”.⁶⁸ Brandom’s account of rational reconstruction attempts to answer the Lewisian metasemantic question of how, as Jessica Keiser puts it, “a language *L* is a language of a population

⁶⁵ Brandom, 2019a, 577. See also Brandom, Robert. 2012. ‘Reason, Genealogy, and the Hermeneutics of Magnanimity’. Presented at the UC Berkeley Graduate Council Lectures, Berkeley, CA, November 12. https://sites.pitt.edu/~rbrandom/Texts/Reason_Genealogy_and_the_Hermeneutics_of.pdf. 6 (published in German as Brandom, Robert. 2015. ‘Den Abgrund reflektieren: Vernunft, Genealogie und die Hermeneutik des Edelmuts’. *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, no. 1: 3–26).

⁶⁶ We shall turn to the task of providing a fuller account of Brandom’s argument in Section 3.4.

⁶⁷ Brandom, 2019a, 430.

⁶⁸ Pinkard, Terry. 2020. ‘Semantic Self-Consciousness’. In *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, edited by Gilles Bouché. New York, NY: Routledge. 111.

P⁹.⁶⁹ The significance of this question derives from the Kantian idea that the genuinely binding rational force of a norm can be instituted only if the agents subject to it *take* themselves to be subject to it, i.e., if they freely impose it on themselves by *recognising* its authority. The issue at stake is hence how we might make the background frameworks we contingently happen to inherit our own in order to transform the matter-of-factual ways of going on they exert over our discursive conduct into genuinely binding rational authority.

Brandom argues that we make our background frameworks our own by selecting, from all of the actual uses of a concept in the past, an Ariadne's thread which makes progressively more explicit some implicit content which turns out to have been guiding all of the community's actual uses of the concept all along. The idea is that by genealogising our concept *uses* we are able to retrospectively discern the conceptual *content* latent in them. The implicit content we have all along been trying to explicitly articulate is what exerts rational authority over the correctness or incorrectness of the uses.

The analogy Brandom employs to explain rational reconstruction is of the judge at common law "charged with deciding whether a novel set of facts warrants the application of a concept".⁷⁰ Just as a judge presiding over a case does not have the freedom to choose which previous decisions she can draw on, so too are we unable to choose how our predecessors used the concepts passed down to us, which background frameworks we are acculturated into, or which 'ways of going on' we are disposed to go on in. Our judge can nevertheless choose, from among all the cases she inherits, *which* cases have "*precedential* significance" in the present by designating as relevant those which exert rational pressure on her judgement "according to the norm implicit in the tradition of prior applications".⁷¹ The judge at common law thus simultaneously explicates and institutes the rational authority of the hitherto implicit governing norm by exercising her agency to commit herself to the significance that the historical cases she selects have for the present case. We thus make the past concept uses we matter-of-factly inherit our own by imbuing them with normative significance in the present, thereby extending the tradition of which we are a part into the future.

⁶⁹ Keiser, Jessica. 2023. *Non-Ideal Foundations of Language*. New York, NY: Routledge. 18. See also Lewis, 2002, 176-7.

⁷⁰ Brandom, 2019a, 601.

⁷¹ Brandom, 2019a, 601.

In the same vein, Queloz and Dutilh Novaes outline accounts of “pragmatic” and “conceptual” genealogy respectively.⁷² Pragmatic genealogy, as Queloz puts it, “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”.⁷³ Similarly, conceptual genealogy is, for Dutilh Novaes, a means of interrogating “the uncritical assimilation of presuppositions and substantive theoretical choices made along the way in the shaping of a concept, which then come to be viewed as truisms”, decisions which we may no longer endorse.⁷⁴ While more explicitly oriented towards the practical than Brandom’s rationalist genealogy, the underlying idea is the same: pragmatic and conceptual genealogies empower us to reflectively endorse or reject the ideas we take for granted by retrospectively identifying the practical purposes they serve and asking if we are prepared to continue endorsing them. Just as Brandom’s account confers normative significance upon otherwise disparate concept uses in such a way as to make explicit the underlying norm governing their use, pragmatic and conceptual genealogies confer practical significance upon our discursive practices by uncovering the functional roles they play in achieving ends we are free to either endorse or reject.⁷⁵ The key point is that pragmatic and conceptual genealogies serve to bring into focus the practical activities our background frameworks either obscure or make visible so that we can consciously choose how to “fashion[...] new concepts and ... evaluat[e] what these concepts should look like” according to ends we wish to pursue.⁷⁶

The motivating idea shared by both accounts is, as Brandom puts it, of “turn[ing] a *past* into a *history*” through the retrospective imposition of a mode of organisation onto an otherwise heterogenous set of historical facts.⁷⁷ Indeed, it is the identification of similarities between those facts which makes explicit

⁷² See Queloz, 2021 and Dutilh Novaes, 2015. See also Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2020a. ‘Carnap Meets Foucault: Conceptual Engineering and Genealogical Investigations’. *Inquiry*. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2020.1860122>. For a critique of this approach (namely Queloz’s), see Smyth, Nicholas. 2023. ‘Purity and Practical Reason: On Pragmatic Genealogy’. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 10 (37): 1057–81. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.4667>. Cf. Queloz, Matthieu. 2024. ‘Defending Genealogy as Conceptual Reverse-Engineering’. *Analysis* 84 (2): 385–400. <https://doi.org/10.1093/analysis/anad010>.

⁷³ Queloz, 2021, 3.

⁷⁴ Dutilh Novaes, 2015, 85.

⁷⁵ Queloz’s account of pragmatic genealogy can itself be seen as an instance of rational reconstruction since a significant component of his project is to argue that pragmatic genealogy constitutes a distinct genealogical tradition which has until now not been made explicit.

⁷⁶ Queloz, 2021, 209.

⁷⁷ Brandom, 2019a, 681.

their previously unseen normative or practical significance. But unlike the various articulations of the future-oriented component of problematising genealogy, the modes of organisation that can be legitimately proposed are normatively constrained by the *actual* commonalities that obtain between the facts they purport to express. It is these normative constraints, serving as the standards against which a proposal can be assessed, which enable us to introduce the ‘direction’ previously lacking from problematising genealogy. Adapting Pinkard’s terminology, I refer to this kind of genealogy as *rationalising genealogy*.

Having sketched the outlines of rationalising genealogy, we are now in a position to identify a second pervasive confusion in the literature: the *problematising/rationalising conflation*. For one, it may be tempting to think of problematising genealogy’s future-oriented component as distinct from its past-oriented component. If one also takes rationalising genealogy to constitute new forms of intelligibility, it is perhaps unsurprising that they might be run together. This would, however, be a mistake. Whereas problematising genealogy aims to expand the field of discursive possibility by transforming our seemingly compulsory ways of going on into more or less contingent, more or less arbitrary responses to specific historical pressures, rationalising genealogy gives “contingent concrete actuality the normative form of necessity” in order to retrospectively imbue our ways of going on with genuinely binding normative force.⁷⁸ But while problematising genealogy carves out a discursive space to be populated with the results of unguaranteed experimentation, rationalising genealogy instead aims to make explicit the practically embedded norms *already* implicitly governing our discursive practices so that they might be submitted to reflection. Hence, while rationalising genealogy does not exactly foreclose the field of discursive possibilities that problematising genealogy seeks to augment, it does, through the process of retrospective reconstruction, make those possibilities determinate by giving rational shape to the discursive episodes making up the discursive traditions in which we participate.

The problematising/rationalising conflation is not, however, the result of mere philosophical tunnel vision, but of the typology with which we navigate the literature. Foucault, Allen, Koopman, Srinivasan, Lorenzini, Queloz, and Dutilh Novaes all contend, in one way or another, that their accounts of genealogy are normatively neutral.⁷⁹ Yet with normative ambition being the only category of analysis against which

⁷⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 17.

⁷⁹ See Foucault, 1984c; Allen, 2008; Allen, 2010; Srinivasan, 2019; Lorenzini, 2020; Lorenzini, 2023; Queloz, 2021; and Dutilh Novaes, 2015. See also Queloz, Matthieu. 2020. ‘How Genealogies Can Affect the Space of Reasons’. *Synthese* 197 (5): 2005–27. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-1777-9>.

they can be differentiated on the tripartite typology, these sometimes radically distinct accounts of genealogy are seen to constitute a unified type. The conflation arises because those genealogies which do not fit into either debunking or vindicatory categories tend to be amalgamated regardless of any other philosophically significant differences they might have because, having adopted a one-dimensional analytical framework from the bipartite typology, the tripartite typology's conceptual resources are simply not rich enough to accommodate their differences. Confusions abound because, in attempting to distinguish problematising genealogy from debunking and vindicatory genealogies, the tripartite typology glosses over the diversity to be found within it. The question now is how we should go about enriching our analytical vocabulary so that we might make those differences visible.

2.8 Two Dimensions of Analysis

Recall that the problem which set us along this path was the threat of self-defeat. In order to defuse it, proponents of the various genealogies we've looked at invoked (at high political and philosophical cost) the idea of normative neutrality. However, this strategy got us no further as the self-defeat objection returned in an even more penetrating semantic form.

But we might ask now why proponents of supposedly normatively neutral genealogies are so keen to play the self-defeat game at all. While it's true that the genealogist cannot problematise a background framework but from within a background framework, one which may itself be subject to the very kinds of problematisation she pursues, the force of the self-defeat objection relies on the assumption that the objective of such inquiry is to discover a background framework fully adequate to a complete description of at least some segment of the world.⁸⁰ But the drive to find some final justification atop which all others are balanced is to misapprehend a basic element of the nature of linguistic activity. As Wittgenstein frequently reminds us, not only is it impossible to get outside of one's own background framework, but what counts as a final justification in the first place "is not an ungrounded presupposition ... [but] an ungrounded way of acting" expressed in the purposes we manifest in inquiry (*OC* §110). This means that while problematising genealogy may not rest on argumentative bedrock, it need not do so to get a grip on

⁸⁰ Cf. Rorty, Richard. 1992. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press and Queloz, Matthieu. 2025. *The Ethics of Conceptualisation: Tailoring Thought and Language to Need*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 13-4 and 114.

the forms of life of which our background frameworks are contingent and partial expressions. There is thus a sense in which the self-defeat objection goes through against problematising genealogy, but that is not quite the knockout blow it might at first seem to be.

The upshot of refusing to play the self-defeat game is that we can wholeheartedly embrace the normativity of both problematising and rationalising genealogies. Doing so means that we are free to ascribe to problematising genealogy the critical ‘direction’ necessary for a politically efficacious critique (unless, of course, the aim is unstructured ethical experimentation) and that rationalising genealogy can institute genuinely authoritative rational norms in the discursive spaces problematising genealogy opens up. Problematising and rationalising genealogies hence undermine and justify in much the same way as debunking and vindicatory genealogies.

Embracing the normativity of problematising and rationalising genealogies raises a number of questions. I will examine just two here. Firstly: *what* do problematising and rationalising genealogies respectively undermine and legitimate?⁸¹ This question is more puzzling than it may at first appear. It might be thought that problematising genealogy, for one, undermines the rational warrant or justificatory status of our background frameworks in the same way that debunking genealogy undermines the justificatory status of our beliefs, the aim in both cases being to prompt us to revise them. The problem is that, as we’ve seen, it does not quite make sense to think of our background frameworks as requiring justification at all. Indeed, it is our background frameworks which constitute the very considerations which structure what we count as justification for what, the point at which a justification is considered sufficient, the kinds of discursive activity which stand in need of justification, and so on. We thus cannot transpose the form of critique found in debunking genealogy into the present context by simply directing it towards our background frameworks.

If problematising genealogy does not undermine the justificatory status of our background frameworks, then what does it undermine? As previously indicated, problematising genealogy aims to tear us away from the ‘sureness’ of a language game. What does this mean? Just as Foucault argues that our background frameworks cloak themselves in the guise of necessity to better maintain the systems of power of which they are a part, Tiisala and Säynäjoki and Tiisala argue that problematising genealogy destabilises

⁸¹ This question was brought to my attention by an anonymous reviewer for whose generous comments I am very grateful.

the “obviousness” that background frameworks suffuse into select aspects of our discursive activity.⁸² By showing that our ways of going on are not as natural or unproblematic as they might appear – that they are the results of questionable, often arbitrary historical forces which could easily have been otherwise – problematising genealogy enables us to delimit a space for critical reflection on the ostensibly given bases of our linguistic activity so that we can interrogate whether or not they accord with purposes we endorse. Problematising genealogy should thus be understood to undermine the perceived fixity of our background frameworks, the aura of inevitability in which they are so often cloaked.

An analogous issue arises in relation to rationalising genealogy. While vindicatory genealogy legitimates our beliefs by outfitting us with additional reasons with which to justify them, background frameworks are, as above, not subject to norms of justification. Rather, rationalising genealogy enables us to retrospectively imbue the regularities we identify in a concept’s history of use with rational significance by imposing an ordering schema on the uses we select for incorporation into the rationalising genealogy which makes explicit their common content. This means that whereas vindicatory genealogy legitimates our beliefs, rationalising genealogy legitimates the very conceptual apparatuses in whose terms our beliefs are formulated.

The second question to be examined is this: what distinguishes debunking from problematising genealogy, on the one hand, and vindicatory from rationalising genealogy, on the other, if it turns out that they are all normative? That is, how do we differentiate, say, debunking from problematising genealogy if, as I contend, they are both straightforwardly undermining? For this we can turn our attention to their respective *objects* of analysis. As we have seen, debunking and vindicatory genealogies examine the rational status of particular beliefs. By contrast, problematising and rationalising genealogy examine the background frameworks in which it becomes possible to think of some content as a believable liable to norms of rationality.⁸³ The distinction is hence between those genealogies which investigate doxastic atoms and those which investigate the background structures through which they are rendered intelligible. This second

⁸² Tiisala, 2017, 9 and Säynäjoki & Tiisala, 2023, 147. Cf. Isaiah Berlin’s discussion of the things which are “left out of [our] investigations ... [because they are] too obvious to need mentioning”. Berlin, Isaiah. 1996. ‘The Sense of Reality’. In *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History*, edited by Henry Hardy. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 15.

⁸³ We might think of this distinction as akin to Davidson’s distinction between meaning-change and language-change. See Davidson, Donald. 1973. ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47: 5-6 and 10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3129898>.

dimension of analysis, when added to the existing normative dimension taken from the bi- and tripartite typologies, thus yields a *two-dimensional* typology:

	Undermining	Legitimizing
Doxastic	Debunking genealogy	Vindictory genealogy
Background	Problematising genealogy	Rationalising genealogy

Figure 3: The Two-Dimensional Typology

There are two main advantages of the two-dimensional typology I propose. Firstly, we need no longer puzzle over the issues associated with invoking a tenuous notion of normative neutrality (such as whether problematising genealogy is subject to the self-defeat objection). By eliminating normative neutrality as a problem requiring a response we can thus get a better understanding of the literature. And secondly, the second dimension of analysis enables us to distinguish between genealogies on the basis of the kinds of objects they investigate, not just their normative objectives. Indeed, it is precisely because the significance of their distinct objects of investigation has been overlooked that quite different genealogies have been grouped together according to the bi- and tripartite typologies' single (and insufficiently rich) axis of analysis. The distinction between debunking and problematising genealogies, for instance, turns out not to hinge on their respective normative statuses, but on the fact that the former is concerned with questions about the rational status of our beliefs while the latter is concerned with the structure of the background frameworks through which those beliefs are presented as objects of philosophical concern. Introducing a second dimension of analysis to our typology can thus help us to better articulate what is characteristic of each of the kinds of genealogy introduced, their relationships to one another, and the problems they face.

An objection which might be raised at this point is that, as Wittgenstein notes, "there is not a sharp division" between the elements of a background framework and the framework itself since "the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing" (OC §§97-8).⁸⁴ Although my view of background frameworks is permissive, this may pose a problem for my

⁸⁴ See also Davidson, 1973, 17-8.

proposed typology for if there is no difference between the objects investigated by debunking and vindicatory genealogies, on the one hand, and problematising and rationalising genealogies, on the other, then it is not clear what work the newly introduced second dimension of analysis is supposed to do. Worse yet, it may collapse the distinction entirely.

Wittgenstein's observation is, I think, basically correct. As W. V. O. Quine notes, what we take to be the fixed points in reference to which the contents of our webs of belief are assessed require inferential connections to other nodes in the web if they are to function as reasons governing its overall behaviour, connections that adaptively configure and reconfigure – sometimes radically so – in light of the new nodes added to the web through experience and our involvement in the world.⁸⁵ For Quine, it is the density of a node's connections which determines its stability, not some function of its semantic content and logical structure. What counts as framework and what as content is hence a function of the structure of the former and the role the latter plays within it. Yet, as Wittgenstein himself notes, we can nevertheless “distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed [of thought] and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other” (*OC* §97) because fixing something “as reliable once for all” is but “a decision for a practical purpose” (*OC* §§48-9). Given that the purpose of presenting a typology is not to engage in exhaustive conceptual analysis but to pursue hermeneutical expediency, this means that while there may indeed be no hard and fast distinction between doxa and background, we are nevertheless entitled to draw a general distinction between the two in light of our present argumentative purposes, viz. composing a navigational aid, not conducting conceptual analysis.

2.9 Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter I have argued that the two existing ways of organising the literature on genealogy, the bi- and tripartite typologies, suffer from confusions which have impeded the development of an accurate understanding of genealogy, the challenges it faces, and its critical potential. This is because the characteristics that both the bi- and tripartite typologies make available for ascription are limited by the paucity of their respective conceptual maps. Those characteristics have consequently been projected to a false level of generality with the normative purposes and objects of concern typical of some genealogies

⁸⁵ See Quine, W. V. O. 1951. ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’. *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1): 20–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2181906>.

mistakenly attributed to others. This has led to the widespread acceptance of what I have called the debunking/problematising and problematising/rationalising conflation.

The addition of a second dimension of analysis enriches the conceptual vocabulary at our disposal with which to navigate the literature and understand the various genealogies which populate it. The two-dimensional conceptual map I propose is thus better able to account for the diversity of extant genealogies, to foreground the distinctive argumentative purposes they pursue, and to suggest ways of overcoming the objections they face.⁸⁶ We can now see, for instance, that while debunking and vindicatory genealogies can circumvent the genetic fallacy objection, it simply does not apply to problematising or rationalising genealogies. Similarly, while debunking genealogy is indeed self-defeating, problematising genealogy is able to ambivalently resist the force of the self-defeat objection by problematising the very presuppositions on which it rests.

It should be noted at this point that I have not introduced any new categories of genealogy: debunking, vindicatory, problematising, and rationalising genealogies have all been previously theorised, albeit with varying levels of philosophical attention and under different names. This chapter instead aims to simply present a better way of *organising* things so as to glean a richer understanding of both the genealogies themselves and the relationships they bear to one another. With a map of the literature to guide us, we need no longer run in circles around issues which have long occupied the literature such as problematising genealogy's normative status.

⁸⁶ An additional benefit of my two-dimensional typology is that it potentially provides a very general framework for thinking about the argumentative purposes of a broad range of philosophical enterprises. Whereas some attempt to make a move within a particular language game, others attempt to redefine the conceptual frameworks that define them. And whereas some attempt to undermine a commitment or practice we already hold, others attempt to enhance our confidence in either an enterprise we already engage in or one we have yet to undertake. Conceptual engineering, for instance, bears striking similarities to possibilising genealogy while lacking an explicitly theorised historical dimension. See Nado, Jennifer. 2021. 'Conceptual Engineering via Experimental Philosophy'. *Inquiry* 64 (1–2): 76–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2019.1667870>; Queloz, Matthieu. 2022. 'Genealogy, Evaluation, and Engineering'. *The Monist* 105 (4): 435–51. <https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onac010>. Similarly, Gramsci's concept of hegemony targets the very same background assumptions as problematising genealogy while remaining tied to a narrowly materialist theory of history. See Gramsci, 1971; Geuss, Raymond. 1981. *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Laclau, Ernesto, and Chantal Mouffe. 2001. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Verso; and Althusser, Louis. 2014. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. London, UK: Verso. It might even be suggested that Thomas Kuhn's and Paul Feyerabend's historicised accounts of scientific practice could be analysed in light of their similarities to both problematising and possibilising genealogies. See Kuhn, Thomas S. 1996. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 3rd ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press and Feyerabend, Paul. 2010. *Against Method*. 4th ed. London, UK: Verso.

One such issue is how genealogy fits into the broader debate about the normative foundations of critical theory. Introducing a second dimension of analysis enables us to identify two conceptions of critique stemming from a common Kantian root. On the one hand stands an account of critique derived from the Enlightenment identification of truth and freedom. According to this account, the objective of critique is to dispel the fogs of dogma and superstition so that the light of truth may guide us to emancipatory self-realisation as rational beings, to a perspective from which we might, as Yeats so yearned, to “hold in a single thought reality and justice”.⁸⁷ Both debunking and problematising genealogies are self-defeating on this conception since the commitments on which the genealogist’s own truth claims depend are liable to the same undermining argument as the object of critique. But there is another form of critique discernible in Foucault’s later work and taken up more recently by Allen, Koopman, Lorenzini, and Lorenzini and Martina Tazzioli.⁸⁸ Rather than freeing ourselves from the shackles of dogma, this conception of critique expresses a critical demand to rework who we are as free agents subject to the demands of truth. This form of critique, as Foucault puts it, uncovers and explicates the “games of truth” which govern “the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognises himself [*sic*] *qua* subject”.⁸⁹ By reflecting these two conceptions of critique in our typology, we outfit ourselves with the tools to both bring reality and justice into closer alignment and to pursue revolutionary self-transformation, the former of which, although vital, is often taken to be the only game in town. Where such an expansion of the notion of critique leads is precisely the work of experimentation left purposefully, if aporetically, undefined.

⁸⁷ Yeats, W. B. 1937. *A Vision*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Macmillan & Co. 25. See also Rorty, Richard. 1999. ‘Trotsky and the Wild Orchids’. In *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London, UK: Penguin Books. 7. Cf. Habermas, Jürgen. 2000. ‘Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn’. In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers. 31 and Taylor, Charles. 2020. ‘Brandom’s Hegel’. In *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, edited by Gilles Bouché. New York, NY: Routledge.

⁸⁸ See Allen, 2008; Koopman, 2013; Lorenzini, 2020; Lorenzini, 2023; and Lorenzini, Daniele, and Martina Tazzioli. 2020. ‘Critique without Ontology: Genealogy, Collective Subjects, and the Deadlocks of Evidence’. *Radical Philosophy* 2 (7): 27–39.

⁸⁹ Foucault, 1984d, 6.

3 On the Genealogy of Norms

A Qualified Defence of Brandom's Hegelianism

3.1 Introduction

Having developed a synoptic view of genealogical anxiety in Chapter 1 and a typology of genealogical inquiry in Chapter 2, we can now embark on the specifically analytical component of this thesis. The puzzle with which Chapter 1 culminated was how – given the brute contingency of the dispositional, cultural, and historical forces which shape both us and our discursive practices – are genuinely binding, rationally authoritative norms possible?¹ The task we face is thus to develop an account of the underlying semantic structure of discursive practice which is able to retain its normative authority in the face of contingency and thereby evade the clutches of genealogical anxiety. By the end of this chapter, we will be in a position to appraise what I believe is the philosophical proposal best able to meet this challenge: Robert Brandom's interwoven account of the social-recognitive institution of normative authority and the historical-recollective determination of conceptual content.² In so doing, we shall come to understand what Brandom's proposal does differently to others in the literature, how it improves on its rivals, and why it

¹ For Wittgenstein, the question might be articulated as: in what does the “hardness of the logical must” (*PI* §437) consist? See also *RFM* I-121.

² It would not be an exaggeration to say that all of Brandom's recent work has been organised in service of ameliorating this vision of genealogical anxiety. Indeed, the very first decision-point at which Brandom arrives in tracing the outline of his overarching inferentialist project is whether to “*assimilate* conceptually structured activity to the nonconceptual activity out of which it arises” or to attend to “what is *distinctive* of or exceptional about the conceptual”. That he selects the latter, choosing to understand how concept-using creatures are discontinuous with the non-concept-using world they inhabit, marks Brandom's project as rationalist through and through. By rendering the explanatory role of reasons-talk superfluous, genealogical inquiry threatens the fundament of his philosophical programme. Brandom, Robert. 2000a. *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 3.

proves to be a genuinely innovative contribution to the contemporary debate on the status of genealogical inquiry.

Were it to be reduced to a slogan, the promise of Brandom's strategy for ameliorating genealogical anxiety lies in its demand, as briefly explicated in Section 2.7, to undertake *more*, not less, genealogical inquiry. Indeed, as Brandom argues, it is only by identifying with the history of the discursive practices in which we actively participate – and hence recognising that “we (all) *make* the norms we bequeath and ... *are made by* the norms we inherit”³ – that we can be reconciled to their contingency. In coming to regard the contingent history of the norms governing our discursive practices as our own, we “giv[e] contingent concrete actuality the normative form of necessity”.⁴ Such identification with the discursive practices into which we find ourselves thrown is precisely what enables us to get a grip on the norms structuring their correct and incorrect employment and thus to adapt them to our reflectively endorsed needs, ends, and values.

Despite the progress it makes, Brandom's proposal encounters fatal problems as a result of its failure to attend to the realities of the social and historical landscape structuring the forms of recognition and recollection we are actually able to undertake. As we shall see in Chapter 4, it is just the fact that our discursive practices are fundamentally embedded in a constellation of social and historical relations which means that the material inequalities, forms of domination, and structural injustices they exhibit come to bear on the constitution and organisation of the grounds of discursive normativity. My *philosophical* endorsement of Brandom's proposal is hence qualified on distinctively *political* grounds. That, however, is a matter for Chapter 4.

In what follows, the main part of our attention shall be devoted to the domain staked out by problematising and rationalising genealogies, i.e., the constitution, structure, and political implications of the genealogical contingency of our background frameworks. This reflects the demands of three considerations. Firstly, since debunking and vindictory genealogies either face the threat of self-defeat or do not give rise to the kinds of pressing philosophical questions that concern us, both forms of genealogical inquiry are comparatively less relevant for our analysis. Secondly, insofar as the contingencies of our background frameworks condition our discursive capacities, focussing on problematising and rationalising genealogies

³ Brandom, Robert. 2019a. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 264.

⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 17.

shall position our analysis at an appropriately non-doxastic register, the level of analysis we must adopt if we are to engage with the form of genealogical anxiety expressed in the rule-following paradox effectively. And thirdly, problematising and rationalising genealogies raise a distinctive set of political questions inaccessible from the epistemic paradigm in which debunking and vindicatory genealogies are operative. Central among those questions is how the field of discursive possibility, what it is intelligible to even consider as subject to assessments of correctness and incorrectness, is conditioned by the material structure of social relations. This is the issue that shall occupy our discussion in Chapter 4. For now, however, we must return our attention to the rule-following paradox.

3.2 Two Unsuccessful Responses to the Rule-Following Paradox

Recall for a moment why we turned our attention to the rule-following paradox in the first place. The rule-following paradox is the strongest possible challenge to the possibility of genuinely binding rational norms and hence, as argued in Section 1.4, also the acutest expression of genealogical anxiety. This is because the rule-following paradox arises upon identification of a naturalistic, historically-informed bedrock of mere *behaviour* – either acculturated or ingrained – where once we saw *performances* liable to normative assessments of correctness and incorrectness. It thus stands to reason that we ought to begin our analysis of the bindingness of discursive normativity with a (brief) examination of existing responses to the rule-following paradox as understanding their shortcomings shall help us to see why Brandom’s response succeeds where they fail.

There are two main strategies in the literature for responding to the rule-following paradox: *foundationalism* and *communitarianism*.⁵ In response to what Brandom calls “the Scylla of regulism” and “the

⁵ As indicated in Section 1.4.3.2, fn. 172, an important third response to the rule-following paradox is *ironism*. For the classic articulation of ironism, see Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Ch. 4: Private Irony and Liberal Hope. I omit ironism about normative authority from analysis here because, as Matthieu Queloz puts it, it is “*counterfactually* foundationalist”. This is because “while it acknowledges that foundations are not in fact available, it still holds on to the foundationalist idea that *if* the authority of any concepts *could* be vindicated, this vindication would *have* to take the form of a derivation of authority from timeless and mind-independent foundations”. Queloz, Matthieu. 2025. *The Ethics of Conceptualisation: Tailoring Thought and Language to Need*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 120. We thus might think of ironism as a metanormative corollary to the moral error theory insofar as both deny that there are such facts as make propositions about rule-following or morality true as the case may be while accepting the underlying cognitivist picture of norms and moral propositions defended by the foundationalist and moral realist respectively. Cf. Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London, UK: Penguin Books. Ch. 1: The Subjectivity of Values and Joyce, Richard. 2001. *The Myth of Morality*.

Charybdis of regularism”, foundationalism resolves the rule-following paradox in favour of Scylla while communitarianism resolves it in favour of Charybdis.⁶ Both, however, seek to found an account of normative authority on some kind of non-normative bedrock.

For foundationalists, normative authority is grounded in the world’s antecedent metaphysical structure, what it is to follow a rule or grasp a meaning just a matter of correspondence to how the world is anyway.⁷ This approach responds to the genuine insight that we must have an *independent* criterion by which to judge instances of rule-following for the simple reason, as Crispin Wright puts it, that the “impression of what ought to be said is one thing and what really ought to be said is something else”.⁸ On this picture, a term’s meaning is given by its extension and the job of our intentional apparatus is, as the grisly philosophical metaphor has it, to ‘carve nature at the joints’. For Theodore Sider, foundationalism’s contemporary standard-bearer, this means that it is the world itself that tells us, in the ‘language’ of “physics, logic, and mathematics”, what following a rule consists in; “there is”, as he continues, “a privileged way to ‘write the book of the world’”.⁹ We subsequently come to learn the language in which the world is written, so the foundationalist says, by bearing some kind of *immediate* relation to the facts of the matter, the very fact of its immediacy meaning that while we can fail to enter the relation correctly, the relation *itself* does not admit of error.¹⁰ Indeed, this is precisely why the facts accessed through that relation are normatively authoritative on the foundationalist picture: the relation through which we access them cannot misfire.¹¹

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Ch. 1: Error Theory and Motivation and Ch. 2: Error Theory and Reasons.

⁶ Brandom, Robert. 1994. *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 29.

⁷ For a brief overview of foundationalist responses to the question of normative authority, see Queloz, 2025, 113-8; Zalabardo, José L. 2003. ‘Wittgenstein on Accord’. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 84 (3): 314. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0114.00176>; Kripke, Saul A. 1980. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; and Lewis, David. 1983. ‘New Work for a Theory of Universals’. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61 (4): 343–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00048408312341131>.

⁸ Wright, Crispin. 2007. ‘Rule-Following without Reasons: Wittgenstein’s Quietism and the Constitutive Question’. *Ratio* 20 (4): 485. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9329.2007.00379.x>.

⁹ Sider, Theodore. 2011. *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 6 and 8.

¹⁰ For empiricists such as Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, we access the facts of the matter through direct sense perception. For rationalists such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, the appropriate mental state is given by deductively reasoning from a set of self-evident truths (variously conceived). Nevertheless, both traditions are foundationalist because perception and rational reflection are understood to bring us into *immediate* contact with the facts of the matter.

¹¹ Taking direct sense perception as an example, the idea, as Brandom puts it, is that “while something could appear to be red and not really be red, it could not *appear* to appear red and not *really* appear red”. Brandom, 2019a, 456.

For communitarians, the grounds of normative authority are instead to be found in the matter-of-factual patterns of behaviour manifested in our public discursive conduct.¹² The underlying idea is that following a rule is not a matter of some fact about one's cognitive state, past or present, but rather of how we are collectively disposed to act, my disposition to assent sufficiently independent from my peers' dispositions to assent to be able to reintroduce talk of correctness and incorrectness. On this picture, as Kripke (mis)takes Wittgenstein to say, our warrant to determine whether or not we ought to assent consists in a "language game' that sustains itself only because of the brute fact that we generally agree".¹³ Rules are thus not explicit principles specified antecedent to action, but rather a formalisation of the regularities structuring our communal discursive conduct, of how we are collectively disposed to go on.

The problems with foundationalism and communitarianism will be well known to those familiar with the rule-following considerations.¹⁴ Less widely recognised, however, is the common root of their failure to resolve the rule-following paradox. For as we shall see in Section 3.3.2, both foundationalism and communitarianism assume the very metasemantic framework from which the rule-following paradox arises, thereby rendering both inadequate. In examining this shared assumption, we shall lay the groundwork to enable us to pass between the horns of the rule-following paradox, a course that dissolves the anxiety-inducing tension between the demand to justify the norms to which we are subject and their genealogically-revealed contingency.

¹² For an overview of communitarian responses to the question of normative authority, see Queloz, 2025, 122-7; Kripke, Saul A. 1982. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell. 89; and Wright, Crispin. 1980. *Wittgenstein on the Foundations of Mathematics*. London, UK: Duckworth. 220.

¹³ Kripke, 1982, 97.

¹⁴ For one of the best known objections to foundationalism, see Wilfrid Sellars' critique of the Myth of the Given in *EPM*s. As Uriah Kriegel has recently argued, Beatrice Edgell presented a comparable argument against the idea of the Given and the foundationalism it putatively supports in the form of a critique of Bertrand Russell's knowledge by acquaintance almost forty years prior. See Kriegel, Uriah. 2024. 'Beatrice Edgell's Myth of the Given'. *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 32 (3): 587–605. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2024.2318369> and Edgell, Beatrice. 1919. 'Is There "Knowledge by Acquaintance"?' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 2* (1): 194–205. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aristoteliansupp/2.1.159>. See also O'Shea, James R. 2021. 'What Is the Myth of the Given?' *Synthese* 199 (3–4): 10543–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-021-03258-6>. For one of the best known objections to communitarianism, see McDowell, John. 1984. 'Wittgenstein on Following a Rule'. *Synthese* 58 (3): 335. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00485246>.

3.3 Two-Stage Metasemantic Strategies

The claim I shall defend in this section is that foundationalism and communitarianism both fail because they assume a *two-stage metasemantic strategy*, the very explanatory schema which institutes what McDowell calls the seemingly “compulsory” dilemma between regulism and regularism in the first place and hence leads us into the arms of the rule-following paradox and genealogical anxiety.¹⁵ The basic idea is that two-stage metasemantic strategies carve a distinction between the explanatorily prior *semantic* and explanatorily anterior *epistemic* components of discursive practice. By distinguishing between the processes through which we determine the meanings of our terms, on the one hand, and how we use those terms in belief and judgement, on the other, two-stage metasemantic strategies aim to make explicit the normative standards against which we assess the correctness of our concept applications in advance of their employment. It is our widespread acceptance of two-stage metasemantic strategies, McDowell continues, that Wittgenstein attempts “to persuade us to reject”, the “misunderstanding” that he aims to disabuse us of.¹⁶ By unpicking this mistake, my account serves not just to analyse the quandaries into which we can so easily fall, but also to diagnose the reasons *why* we fall into them so easily.

For our purposes, the problem with responses to the rule-following paradox which rely on two-stage metasemantic strategies is that they do not *resolve* our experience of genealogical anxiety, but rather merely *forestall* it. This is because, as a matter of fact, we simply do not fix the meanings of our terms antecedent to deploying them in judgement. Rather, we determine them, in reciprocally reflexive fashion, in and through the rough and tumble of working out what we ought to believe. As I shall argue in Section 4.2, that such a strategy even appears viable is a downstream consequence of a kind of materially-induced ideological distortion since the attempt to fix in place what is an essentially social achievement is the discursive move characteristic of ideology.

In contrast to the explanatory distinction between meaning and belief assumed by two-stage metasemantic strategies, Brandom’s account assumes a *one-stage* metasemantic strategy according to which meaning and belief are two aspects of one process. Brandom’s account thus has the logical shape required, as McDowell puts it, to “steer a course between ... Scylla and ... Charybdis” without denying the force of

¹⁵ McDowell, 1984, 338.

¹⁶ McDowell, 1984, 338 and 331.

the rule-following paradox.¹⁷ My endorsement of Brandom’s account is nevertheless moderated by McDowell’s observation that there is another strategy available to us made visible by reflecting on what he takes to be the central lesson of the *Investigations*: “the idea of a custom or practice”.¹⁸ It is initiation into the customs and shared practices definitional of human life that characterises language acquisition, acculturation, and the coming-to-maturity referred to in German as *Bildung*.¹⁹ However, while McDowell seems to understand this commitment to amount to something akin to philosophical quietism, I shall argue in Chapter 4 that it articulates a demand for *political* intervention when those customs and practices contribute to and are the products of systems of oppression and injustice. That, however, is to get ahead of ourselves. For now, let’s turn to the issue of two-stage metasemantic strategies.

3.3.1 The Structure of Two-Stage Metasemantic Strategies

Two-stage metasemantic strategies describe a way of approaching the analysis of linguistic activity. The basic move that characterises a two-stage metasemantic strategy is its institution of what Brandom calls a “division of semantic and epistemological labour”.²⁰ For those who assume a two-stage metasemantic strategy, linguistic activity is composed of two conceptually distinct yet ordered components: an explanatorily anterior semantic stage at which we *define* the meanings of our terms and an explanatorily posterior epistemic stage at which we *apply* those terms to the world in belief and judgement.²¹ With what we mean and what we take to be true conceptually independent, linguistic analysis proceeds, as Robert Stalnaker puts it, “by first setting up a language, and then laying down rules for matching up the sentences of that language with propositions or truth values”.²² For Brandom, this means that two-stage metasemantic strategies are

¹⁷ McDowell, 1984, 341.

¹⁸ McDowell, 1984, 342. See also *PI* §198, *PI* §202, and *RFM* VI-31.

¹⁹ See McDowell, John. 1996. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Lecture V: Action, Meaning, and the Self.

²⁰ Brandom, Robert. 2012. ‘Reason, Genealogy, and the Hermeneutics of Magnanimity’. Presented at the UC Berkeley Graduate Council Lectures, Berkeley, CA, November 12. https://sites.pitt.edu/~rbrandom/Texts/Reason_Genealogy_and_the_Hermeneutics_of.pdf. 10 (published in German as Brandom, Robert B. 2015. ‘Den Abgrund reflektieren: Vernunft, Genealogie und die Hermeneutik Des Edelmut’s’. *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, no. 1: 3–26).

²¹ See Queloz, Matthieu. 2025. *The Ethics of Conceptualisation: Tailoring Thought and Language to Need*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 81-2.

²² Stalnaker, Robert. 1970. ‘Pragmatics’. *Synthese* 22 (1–2): 272–89. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00413603>. 274. See also Brandom, 2019a, 15. Nancy Bauer similarly contends that the central claim of J. L. Austin’s *How To Do Things with Words* is “that doing philosophy ... does not require that we be able to pin down the semantics of natural

committed to what he dubs “semantic purity”, the view that “the contents concepts possess are not at all affected by the use of those concepts in making judgements”, that linguistic activity and the analysis thereof demands that “the contents of propositional attitudes have already somehow been fixed in advance and independently of the rough-and-tumble of assessing evidence and deciding what to believe”.²³ On this picture, as Brandom continues, “two independent elements combine to make epistemic commitments (true claims): semantic commitments (picking a language, concepts), and how the world is”, each analytically unrelated to the other.²⁴ This is, broadly construed, the underlying structure of the *Tractarian* conception of discursive practice that the *Investigations* aims to correct.²⁵ Indeed, its acceptance is so widespread that Stalnaker goes on to note that it is generally how “the study of formal semantics has proceeded”.²⁶

Let’s unpack things in more detail. The *semantic* stage of a two-stage account proceeds by stipulating the meanings of the terms and sentences of a language *L* through the employment of what Rudolf Carnap – the theorist who most explicitly exhorts the virtues of two-stage metasemantic strategies – calls “meaning postulates”, propositions which express the logical relations of consequence and incompatibility that obtain between the otherwise logically independent predicates in *L*.²⁷ For example, rather than defining the predicate ‘bachelor’ by reference to our prior knowledge of how the term is generally used by English speakers or by conducting to an empirical survey of the marital status of bachelors, we define it by laying down postulates which stipulate that ‘bachelor’ is logically incompatible with the predicate ‘married’ and logically necessitates the predicate ‘man’. On this picture, meaning determination is, as Carnap puts it, “not a matter of knowledge but of decision”, the theorist “free to choose their postulates, guided not by their beliefs concerning facts of the world but by their intentions with respect to the meanings”.²⁸

language in advance of what Wittgenstein ... calls ‘looking and seeing’’. Bauer, Nancy. 2015. *How to Do Things with Pornography*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 54. See also *PI* §66.

²³ Brandom, 2012, 10 and 11. Brandom also articulates the position as commitment to the idea that we can “pursu[e] semantics independently of commitment to how things actually are”. Brandom, 2012, 10.

²⁴ Brandom, 2012, 10.

²⁵ Wittgenstein famously contends that St Augustine gives the archetype of this conception of language. As Wittgenstein summarises the position: “The individual words in language name objects – sentences are combinations of such names. – In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands” (*PI* §1). See also Saint Augustine of Hippo. 1907. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. Translated by E. B. Pusey. London, UK: J. M. Dent & Sons. I:VIII.13.

²⁶ Stalnaker, 1970, 274.

²⁷ Carnap, Rudolf. 1952. ‘Meaning Postulates’. *Philosophical Studies* 3 (5): 66. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02350366>.

²⁸ Carnap, 1952, 68.

With the meanings of the terms in L thus defined, we can now proceed to the *epistemic* stage. It is here that we associate the terms in L with the elements of the world we encounter in cognition through the use of rules for matching sentences of the language with truth-values, how the world is anyway determining which are true and which false. This means, as Queloiz notes, that “as radically free as we are in the first phase to ... choose which concepts to adopt, so rigidly bound are we in the second phase by the concepts we have chosen and by how the world in fact is”.²⁹ Since Carnap commits himself to a “principle of tolerance” between alternative frameworks of meaning, “everyone is at liberty to build up his [*sic*] own logic, i.e., his own form of language, as he wishes. All that is required of him is that, if he wishes to discuss it, he must state his methods clearly, and give syntactical rules instead of philosophical arguments”.³⁰ As Queloiz continues, Carnap’s point is that “it does not matter which framework we choose, as long as the judgements we form within it are true”.³¹

For Carnap, the point of pursuing a two-stage metasemantic strategy is to enable a robust definition of analyticity. For while it is obvious why certain sentences are analytic in virtue of their logical structure (such as ‘ P or not- P ’), it is less clear in the case of sentences such as ‘All bachelors are unmarried’. Understanding why sentences of the latter class are analytic requires explicating the logical relations between the intensions of the predicates that feature in them. Carnap’s methodology facilitates such understanding because we can simply defer to the meaning postulates setting out the logical relations between the predicates involved. The idea is that explicitly stating the logical relations between the predicates in L , regardless of their factivity, helps us to achieve transparency regarding the truth-conditions of otherwise ambiguous sentences.³² This is especially important in the construction of formal languages as the point of constructing a formal language is to gain clarity on the logical and grammatical relations between the terms and sentences in them.

²⁹ Queloiz, 2025, 81.

³⁰ Carnap, Rudolf. 1937. *Logical Syntax of Language*. New York, NY: Routledge. §17.

³¹ Queloiz, 2025, 127.

³² The sentence ‘All bachelors are unmarried’ is perhaps a poor example of the kind of uncertainty about a sentence’s status that Carnap’s methodology aims to eliminate because the theorist knows, as he puts it, that “the English words ‘bachelor’ and ‘married’ are always or usually understood in such a way that they are incompatible”. There are, however, countless other cases in which the ambiguity is more pronounced such as ‘All ravens are black’ for which the logical relations of ‘raven’ and ‘black’ are not obvious. Carnap, 1952, 68.

Also worthy of note is that this two-stage model can characterise both what we might call *semantic-first* and *pragmatic-first* accounts of linguistic activity.³³ Semantic-first accounts, on the one hand, proceed as just described: semantic definition, typically via extensional analysis over sets of possible worlds, followed by epistemic application. Pragmatic-first accounts, on the other, work in the opposite direction. After starting with an examination of our actual patterns of belief and judgement, pragmatists who assume a two-stage metasemantic strategy such as Stalnaker and Paul Grice then attempt to reconstruct, *post hoc*, how we have defined our terms as a matter of fact.³⁴ Whereas the objective of semantic-first accounts is to *prescribe* a theory of discursive practice, the objective of pragmatic-first accounts is instead to *describe* the theory we tacitly assume already.

Yet despite this apparent reversal of explanatory priority, there is an important sense in which pragmatic-first accounts also assume a semantic-epistemic explanatory order. For although pragmatic-first accounts begin with a survey of what we take to be true, the very process of retroactive meaning determination *ipso facto* structures what we take to be true. This means that while pragmatic-first accounts have the merit of being fundamentally iterative where semantic-first accounts are comparatively straightforward in their explanatory approach, it is precisely the circularity that such iteration introduces which means that we can legitimately begin analysis from either the semantic or epistemic stage of the process. For the sake of simplicity – and to avoid any additional complications that the circularity of pragmatic-first accounts may introduce – I will focus my attention on semantic-first accounts in what follows.

3.3.2 Semantic Naïveté and Metalinguistic Regress

For Brandom, the key problem with two-stage metasemantic strategies is that they “overdescribe actual linguistic practice” since the distinction between the semantic and the epistemic, between what we mean and what we take to be true, ultimately warps the accounts of discursive practice that result.³⁵ As he claims elsewhere, this becomes apparent when their commitment to semantic purity is taken to be “intelligible for

³³ I attribute the terminology of semantic- and pragmatic-first accounts of discursive practice to Keiser, Jessica. 2023. *Non-Ideal Foundations of Language*. New York, NY: Routledge. 4.

³⁴ See Stalnaker, 1970 and Grice, Paul. 1989. *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 4. See also Keiser, 2023, Ch. 3: Grice.

³⁵ Brandom, Robert. 2000b. ‘Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesising Naturalism and Historicism’. In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert Brandom. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers. 179.

an *autonomous* intentional stratum”, that is, for an intentionally structured domain such as natural language not couched in and dependent upon “a semantically more powerful metalanguage”.³⁶ As Brandom continues, the problem is that “while [a] two-stage procedure makes perfect sense for formal or artificial languages, it makes no sense for natural languages. All speakers do is *use* the language”.³⁷ This, it seems to me, is plainly correct. For whereas meaning is just a matter of stipulation in the context of artificial languages, any two-stage account for natural language is “bound to invoke semantic stories about the first stage that make the notion of conceptual content ultimately magical”.³⁸ To insist that the semantic purity of two-stage metasemantic strategies *is* intelligible for autonomous intentional strata is to be committed to what Brandom calls “semantic naïveté”, the view that it is possible take the semantic *contents* of our discursive practices for granted independently of their relations to other discursive practices.³⁹

Astute readers will no doubt have already discerned why two-stage metasemantic strategies mystify any determinate notion of semantic content. For given their reliance on rules for pairing sentences to truth-values in the transition between semantic and epistemic stages, two-stage metasemantic strategies threaten to reintroduce the regress of rules, only now at a metasemantic level. The problem will by now be a familiar one. Since semantic determination is itself a linguistic activity, we require a metalanguage *L'* in which to specify the meanings of the terms in a language *L*. But if that is the case, we then require a meta-metalanguage *L''* to specify the meanings of the terms in *L'*, and so on and so on *ad infinitum*. This is precisely what prompts Wittgenstein to claim that we “cannot use language to get outside of language” (*PR_W* I:6), nor can we view it, as McDowell articulates it, “from sideways on – from a standpoint independent of all the human activities and reactions that locate those practices in our ‘whirl of organism’”.⁴⁰ If we instead contend that it is possible to determine the terms in *L* *pre*-linguistically, then we invite the charge of regulism that started us on this journey in the first place. And while we may be able to halt the regress in the construction of formal languages since *L'* is just the natural language of the theorist, *there is no such thing* as a natural

³⁶ Brandom, 2012, 10.

³⁷ Brandom, 2012, 9. See also Brandom, Robert. 2009. *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 83 and Brandom, 2019a, 15.

³⁸ Brandom, 2012, 10.

³⁹ Brandom, 2012, 7.

⁴⁰ McDowell, John. 1981. ‘Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following’. In *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, edited by Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich. London, UK: Routledge. 150.

metalanguage.⁴¹ Indeed, the suggestion that there is either simply activates the metalinguistic regress above or, as is particularly clear in the case of mentalistic accounts of intentionality, voids the notion of normativity entirely since, as Saul Kripke notes, “the relation of meaning and intention to future action is *normative*, not *descriptive*”.⁴² Whichever way you look at it, two-stage metasemantic strategies just can’t seem to get off the ground. It is this fundamental insight – that any account of discursive practice we develop must ultimately be explicable in terms of how we use language – that Brandom’s project endeavours to respect.⁴³

We are now also in a position to see why foundationalism and communitarianism fail as responses to the rule-following paradox. Of the two, foundationalism most clearly exhibits a two-stage structure since it self-consciously seeks to fix the standards that determine what counts as correctly following a rule prior to linguistic performance. Communitarianism can in its turn be seen to assume a pragmatic-first two-stage metasemantic strategy since it determines what counts as correctly following a rule by surveying the regularities of belief and judgement expressed in our linguistic conduct. Yet even though communitarianism has the advantage of establishing a feedback loop which complicates an otherwise straightforwardly flawed two-stage structure, meaning and belief are still related *sequentially* on this picture. In both cases however, treating the semantic and epistemic components of discursive practice as conceptually independent distorts our vision of what discursive practice consists in. And while it is of course the case that *all* theory is necessarily idealising to some extent, doing so in the present manner has the effect of abstracting away from the very complexity which renders our patterns of utterance distinctively discursive.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Cf. Fodor, Jerry A. 1980. *The Language of Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Esp. Ch. 2: Private Language, Public Languages.

⁴² Kripke, Saul A. 1982. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: An Elementary Exposition*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell. 37.

⁴³ Carnap, in recognition of their explanatory limits, explicitly restricts two-stage metasemantic strategies to the development of “semantical language-systems” since the problems facing an explication of analyticity “for natural languages are of an entirely different nature” to those facing artificial languages. Carnap, 1952, 66; cf. Quine, W. V. O. 1960. ‘Carnap and Logical Truth’. *Synthese* 12 (4): 350–74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00485423>. Yet despite Carnap’s warnings, Stanley Cavell notes that “unfortunate[ly] ... artificial language has come to seem a general *alternative* to natural language”. Cavell, Stanley. 2015. ‘Must We Mean What We Say?’ In *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 39–40.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316286616>. Resisting this philosophical tendency is the commitment from which ordinary language philosophy begins. See, amongst other things, Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press; Cavell, Stanley. 2000. ‘Excursus on Wittgenstein’s Vision of Language’. In *The New Wittgenstein*, edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read. New York, NY: Routledge; Diamond, Cora. 1989. ‘Rules: Looking in the Right Place’. In *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars: Essays in Honour of Rush Rhees (1905–89)*, edited by D. Z. Phillips and Peter Winch. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan; and Crary, Alice, and Rupert Read, eds. 2000. *The New Wittgenstein*. New York, NY: Routledge.

⁴⁴ For an extended discussion of the dynamics of theoretical idealisation, see Keiser, 2023, Ch. 1: Introduction; Weisberg, Michael. 2007. ‘Three Kinds of Idealisation’. *Journal of Philosophy* 104 (12): 639–59.

With two-stage metasemantic strategies off the table, what, then, is the alternative? Is it even possible to model discursive practice without introducing a distinction between the contents of our terms and how we employ them in belief and judgement? Indeed, how are we to analyse discursive practice if *not* by breaking it down into semantic and epistemic components? Such doubts are perhaps understandable. Indeed, W. V. O. Quine notes that commitment to semantic purity is in a sense perfectly reasonable. For as he puts it, the fact that “truth in general depends on both language and extralinguistic fact” means it is natural “to suppose in general that the truth of a statement is somehow *analysable* into a linguistic component and a factual component [my emphasis]”, that is, into semantic and epistemic components.⁴⁵

As Quine famously goes on to show, however, such a distinction is illusory because there do not seem to be any sentences whose truth is exclusively a matter of one or the other. Donald Davidson provides a (perhaps remote) example to illustrate the point. If one day

you see a ketch sailing by and your companion says, ‘Look at that handsome yawl,’ you may be faced with a problem of interpretation. One natural possibility is that your friend has mistaken a ketch for a yawl, and has formed a false belief. But if his vision is good and his line of sight favourable it is even more plausible that he does not use the word ‘yawl’ quite as you do, and has made no mistake at all about the position of the jigger on the passing yacht.⁴⁶

Were questions of meaning and of what we take to be true analysable independently of one another, such a puzzle would not arise. Since it does, however, determining what someone means must involve more than simply looking up the definitions of the terms that feature in their utterances as if in a table.⁴⁷ As the case of our novice sailor shows, what we mean partly involves reference to what we judge to be the case, and what we judge to be the case, in its turn, partly involves reference to what we mean.⁴⁸ This suggests not only

<https://doi.org/10.5840/jphil20071041240>; and Engelhardt, Jeff. 2024. *Nonideal Theory and Content Externalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Ch. 1: De-Idealisation, Mind, and Language. See also Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2017. *As If: Idealisation and Ideals*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁴⁵ Quine, W. V. O. 1951. ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’. *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1): 20–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2181906>. 34.

⁴⁶ Davidson, Donald. 1973. ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47: 18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3129898>. See also Davidson, Donald. 1975. ‘Thought and Talk’. In *Mind and Language*, edited by Samuel D. Guttenplan. Wolfson College Lectures 1974. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.

⁴⁷ See Wittgenstein’s example of “send[ing] someone shopping” with “a slip marked ‘five red apples’” (*PI* §1).

⁴⁸ It is important to note that just because there is no *principled* distinction between the semantic and the epistemic, that does not mean that they are to be identified with one another. What counts as concept and what as belief will vary between discursive contexts according to the specific manner in which the discursive practice features and is

that there is no clear distinction between the semantic and the epistemic, but that they are thoroughly entangled. The challenge we face, as Davidson continues, is “to abstract from the evidence a workable theory of meaning *and* an acceptable theory of belief [my emphasis]” on the basis of “sentences held true”.⁴⁹ This means, as Brandom concludes, that how speakers use a language “must somehow determine both what their expressions mean and which sentences they take to be true”.⁵⁰ As Wittgenstein articulates the point,

If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. – It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call ‘measuring’ is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement (*PI* §242).

The challenge, in other words, is to develop an account of discursive practice according to a *one-stage* metasemantic strategy.

3.3.3 Genealogy’s Two-Stage Metasemantic Structure?

Before we turn to the task of reconstructing Brandom’s account of discursive normativity, there is one final issue of vital importance that we must address: Brandom’s contention that genealogical critique itself rests on a two-stage metasemantic strategy.⁵¹ Brandom argues that the

global genealogical reductive explaining away of norms in favour of attitudes presumes that it is intelligible for the contents of propositional attitudes to stay in place after normative reason-relations among their judgeable contents are relinquished. Otherwise what is being explained genealogically can no longer be understood as *believings* – as attitudes of taking things to be (representing them as) thus-and-so. If our attitudes were not genuinely

embedded in the larger practical situation of which it is a part. But that is a quite different thing to saying that there is no difference between them at all. Indeed, even though there is no clear distinction between a river and the ocean into which it drains, that does not mean that we cannot intelligibly talk about rivers and oceans independently of one another.

⁴⁹ Davidson, 1973, 18. For a comparative analysis of Davidson’s and Foucault’s linguistic projects *vis-à-vis* the act of interpretation, see Prado, C. G. 2010. ‘Foucault, Davidson, and Interpretation’. In *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O’Leary and Christopher Falzon. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

⁵⁰ Brandom, 2012, 9.

⁵¹ Indeed, Brandom reflects on two-stage metasemantic strategies precisely as a means of developing the semantic self-defeat objection he presents and which we briefly examined in Section 2.6. See also Wolf, W. Clark. 2022. ‘Debunkings *de dicto* and *de re*: Brandom on Genealogical Explanation’. *Journal of Transcendental Philosophy* 3 (1): 123–45. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jtph-2021-0046>.

conceptually contentful, then we would not even be *purporting* to represent things as being thus-and-so; things would not even *seem* to us to be thus-and-so.⁵²

For Brandom, genealogical critique operates by naturalistically reducing putatively norm-governed behaviour into mere attitudes subject to the contingencies of history, disposition, and cultural situation, the fact that we take something to be true revealed to be nothing more than the result of historical forces unresponsive to the truth of the matter. The problem with this picture is that it leaves open the question of how we are to “understand the contentfulness of beliefs apart from their situation in a normative space of reasons”.⁵³ This means, Brandom argues, that if genealogical critique is to be normatively efficacious, then we must assume that the semantic and epistemic components of our discursive practices are distinct. For if they weren’t, then genealogically relocating our epistemic states to the space of law would undercut their status *qua* epistemic states, their determinate *aboutness* vacated of all content. The genealogist thus seems committed to an impossible two-stage metasemantics which places her on the horns of a dilemma: either genealogical critique is normatively inert or it fails to get a genuine grip on its intended objects of critique. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

There are two replies of varying sophistication that the genealogist can offer here. For one, it is perfectly acceptable – and, I think, correct – to note that Brandom’s understanding of the variety of genealogical critique leaves much to be desired. For Brandom, genealogical critique aims to void the rational status of our beliefs and judgements. Yet as argued in Section 2.5, there are forms of genealogical inquiry that do not target our epistemic states at all. Indeed, the background frameworks that problematising genealogies target do not themselves appear to be semantically contentful in the first place since they constitute the background conditions in relation to which the very idea of propositional contentfulness becomes intelligible. The suggestion that all genealogical critique is of the kind Brandom has in mind thus seems to be a paradigmatic instance of the debunking/problematising conflation. This means that while *debunking* genealogies may indeed rely on an implausible two-stage metasemantic strategy, Brandom’s objection does not apply to the full universe of genealogical inquiry.

⁵² Brandom, 2012, 11.

⁵³ Brandom, 2012, 7.

The subtler reply is to note that Brandom seems to interpret the results of genealogical critique *de re* rather than *de dicto*.⁵⁴ What exactly does this mean? *De re* and *de dicto* interpretations refer to different ways of parsing the logical syntax of propositions involving intensional operators such as ‘believes’. Consider the following belief ascription:

- 1) S believes that x is F .

On a *de re* interpretation, 1) will be understood to mean

- 2) There is some x such that S believes that x is F .

On this reading, the existential quantifier has a wide scope within which the belief operator falls, meaning that the former binds the variable *across* the propositional attitude denoted by the latter. According to 2), S believes that some particular thing is an F .

On a *de dicto* interpretation however, 1) will be understood to mean

- 3) S believes that there is some x such that x is F .

On this reading, the existential quantifier has a narrow scope and hence does *not* contain the belief operator. This means that the former does not bind the variable across the propositional attitude denoted by the latter. According to 3), S simply believes that there are F s (but may or may not believe of any one particular thing that it is an F). Depending on how it is disambiguated, the meaning of 1) will thus be vastly different.

For Brandom, genealogical critique trades in *de re* claims. This is because, as Brian Lightbody notes, Brandom seems to think that the purpose of genealogical inquiry is to “spell out how the *actual* ... phenomenon in question developed in a step by step process much like a scientific theory provides an account of an observation report”.⁵⁵ Were this the case, then Brandom’s charge that genealogical critique assumes a two-stage metasemantic strategy would indeed be correct. For while the truth or falsity of a claim interpreted *de dicto* depends solely on the epistemic state of the believer, interpreting it *de re* must, as Lightbody continues, “assume[...] a clear distinction between factual and theoretical statements”, i.e.,

⁵⁴ See Quine, W. V. O. 1956. ‘Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes’. *The Journal of Philosophy* 53 (5): 177–87. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2022451>.

⁵⁵ Lightbody, Brian. 2020. ‘Hermeneutics vs. Genealogy: Brandom’s Cloak or Nietzsche’s Quilt?’ *The European Legacy* 25 (6): 645. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2020.1756597>.

between the meanings of whatever x and F denote, on the one hand, and whether some particular x is in fact F , on the other.⁵⁶ Lightbody argues, however, that it is simply inaccurate to understand the results of genealogical critique solely along these lines since, as seen in Section 2.5, certain forms of genealogical critique, viz. problematising genealogy, do not set out to chart a phenomenon's actual process of historical development. Rather, problematising genealogies trace the boundaries of the discursive space in which we believe, i.e., in which it is possible for S to believe that x is a candidate for F -ness. Since the function of problematising genealogy is to outline the forms of belief made possible by the arrangement of discursive space we inhabit, this means, as Justin Broackes puts it, that “there are ... no [genealogical] beliefs which are best reported by a *de re* ascription” because “the full nature of [one's] belief will not be captured simply by specifying the object; the *way* in which it is thought of must also be expressed”.⁵⁷ As such, Brandom's objection misses the mark as a critique of problematising genealogy and therefore fails as an objection to genealogical critique in general.

3.4 A Qualified Defence of Brandom's Hegelianism

This at last brings us to what I believe is the most promising means of overcoming genealogical anxiety: the neo-Hegelian pragmatist account of discursive normativity presented in Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust*.⁵⁸ The overarching objective of Brandom's project is to develop an account of “*conceptual content*”.⁵⁹ For Brandom, “concepts are rules that determine what counts as a reason for (or against) applying them, and what applying them counts as a reason for (or against)”, their contents determining what those reasons are in each case.⁶⁰ Developing an account of conceptual content is hence a means of addressing the rule-following paradox –

⁵⁶ Lightbody, 2020, 645.

⁵⁷ Broackes, Justin. 1986. ‘Belief *De Re* and *De Dicto*’. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (144): 377. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2220191>.

⁵⁸ Brandom reads Hegel as “putting forward a new metaphysics of meaning and intentionality, a highly structured story about the pragmatics of semantics: about the sorts of *doings* that are the necessary background for *saying* or *intending* anything determinately contentful, and about the sense in which concepts can be thought of as having determinate contents”. Brandom 2019, 634.

⁵⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 2.

⁶⁰ Brandom, 2019a, 9.

the background problem to which Brandom takes his project to be a response⁶¹ – insofar as it aims to make sense of the norm-governed relations between mind and world.

Brandom goes on to present a sophisticated vision of discursive normativity and practice “comprising ... three interlocking interdependencies”: an inferential-expressivist account of referential purport, a social-recognitive account of the institution of normative authority, and a historical-recollective account of the determination of conceptual content.⁶² Together, these components “form a hierarchy, with each commitment presupposing those that come before it”.⁶³ According to Brandom, Hegel’s absolute idealism “is what you get if you endorse all of them”.⁶⁴ The result is an innovative, programmatic picture of discursive practice according to which the genuinely binding authority of discursive norms reciprocally conditions and is conditioned by their contents, their social institution and historical determination opposite sides of the same coin. Brandom’s account duly exhibits a one-stage metasemantic structure insofar as its social-recognitive and historical-recollective components, both of which are couched in an inferential-expressivist account of the mind-world relation, are simply different faces of one and the same process of norm-governed discursive practice.

Before embarking on the process of reconstructing Brandom’s account, we must first introduce two scope restrictions. Firstly, although the inferential-expressivist component of Brandom’s account is the most explanatorily basic, we shall focus on its social-recognitive and historical-recollective components as they come to bear on the rule-following paradox, and hence on genealogical anxiety, most directly. Nevertheless, it will do us well to sketch the broad strokes of the inferential-expressivist component of Brandom’s argument.

⁶¹ It would not be an exaggeration to say that all of Brandom’s recent work has been organised in service of ameliorating genealogical anxiety. Indeed, the very first decision-point that Brandom arrives at in tracing the outline of his overarching inferentialist project is whether to “*assimilate* conceptually structured activity to the nonconceptual activity out of which it arises” or to attend to “what is *distinctive* of or exceptional about the conceptual”. That he selects the latter, choosing to understand how concept-using creatures are *dis*continuous with the non-concept-using world they inhabit, means that Brandom’s rationalist project is particularly threatened by genealogical inquiry. Brandom, 2000a, 3. See also Sachs, Carl B. 2020. ‘Fregel vs the Masters of Suspicion: A Critical Notice of Robert Brandom’s *A Spirit of Trust?*’. *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 12 (2). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.2231>.

⁶² Brandom, 2019a, 26.

⁶³ Brandom, 2019a, 205.

⁶⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 205. See also Brandom, 2019a, 213 and 374.

Briefly, the inferential-expressivist component of Brandom's account explains the relations between "objective states of affairs and ... subjective acts of thinking or judging".⁶⁵ Brandom argues that something's being conceptually contentful consists in its standing in relations of "incompatibility and consequence" to other such conceptually articulated items.⁶⁶ These are the kinds of relations that obtain between 'triangular' and 'circular' and between 'metallic' and 'conductive' respectively: something's being triangular is *incompatible* with its being circular; if something is metallic, then it is *consequently* also conductive. These kinds of relations can be articulated in two forms: alethic modal and deontic normative. On the alethic side, it is metaphysically *impossible* for something to be both triangular and circular, and if something is metallic, then it is *necessarily* also conductive.⁶⁷ On the deontic side, while it is not *impossible* to believe that triangles can be circles, it is *impermissible* to do so. Similarly, while believing something to be metallic does not *necessarily* mean that one also believes it to be conductive, believing something to be metallic *obliges* one to believe it conductive. Alethic and deontic articulations of the conceptual are related, Brandom continues, insofar as "they are different *forms* that one identical conceptual *content* can take".⁶⁸ Both alethic modal and deontic normative forms of conceptual content presuppose the other insofar as one cannot be deemed to be a competent navigator of one domain without recognising the isomorphic relation it bears to the other. For Brandom, the upshot of this account is that it articulates the "intentional relations between knowing subjects and the objective world they know about" on the basis of a "nonpsychological conception of the conceptual".⁶⁹ This is how the inferential networks we use to navigate the world get an appropriate representational grip on reality. For the sake of concision, I shall leave detailed discussion of this topic aside.

This brings us to the second scope restriction I make. As its subtitle suggests, *A Spirit of Trust* is an interpretation of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Brandom's intention being to translate its notoriously gnostic treatment of the normative structure of modernity into the idiom of contemporary Anglophone philosophy. In this regard, although praised for its ingenuity and rigour, it has been received relatively critically.⁷⁰ Stephen

⁶⁵ Brandom, 2019a, 2.

⁶⁶ Brandom, 2019a, 2.

⁶⁷ Cf. Sellars, Wilfrid. 2007b. 'Inference and Meaning'. In *In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, edited by Kevin Scharp and Robert Brandom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁶⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 3.

⁶⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 20 and 50.

⁷⁰ For some particularly incisive commentaries on *A Spirit of Trust*, see McDowell, John. 2021. 'Notes on *A Spirit of Trust*'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (3): 722–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12854>; Stern, Robert. 2021. 'In the Spirit of Hegel?' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (3): 734–40.

Houlgate, for instance, claims that “the book ... sets out *Brandom’s* ideas rather than Hegel’s” and that “Brandom seems to me not always, and in some cases not at all, to do justice to Hegel’s core insights in the *Phenomenology*”.⁷¹ Nevertheless, the value that *A Spirit of Trust* holds for my project lies not in the accuracy of its Hegel scholarship, but in its status as a *de re* account of discursive normativity, an account that just so happens to be (putatively) Hegelian *de dicto*. I am happy to defer to those better qualified to judge the work’s interpretative merits since its relevance for my purposes is primarily conceptual. As it is beyond the scope of this thesis to adjudicate which elements of *A Spirit of Trust* should be attributed to Hegel and which to Brandom, I shall attribute what follows to Brandom alone unless otherwise specified.⁷²

Finally, it’s worth noting that while the following discussion frequently analyses the structure of *practical* normativity, the fact that Brandom presents a fundamentally *pragmatic* account of *discursive* normativity means that we can permissibly transition between both domains as required.

3.4.1 The Social-Recognitive Institution of Normative Authority

We begin our analysis at the second stage of Brandom’s argument. This has the disadvantage of glossing over the relations between objective matters of fact and the shared inferential networks which give them rational expression. However, since Brandom claims that “explaining empirical goings-on is an essentially norm-governed activity”, we can nevertheless set off from here because the social-recognitive component of Brandom’s account outlines “the nature of the norms governing the practices that reveal the intricately ... structured objective world”, norms which are, Brandom tells us, “socially instituted by attitudes of reciprocal recognition”.⁷³ It is to the task of reconstructing this argument that we now turn.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12856>; Pippin, Robert B. 2021. “‘All for One and One for All’: Robert Brandom’s *A Spirit of Trust*”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (3): 728–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12855>; Honneth, Axel. 2021a. ‘Demoralising Recognition: Comments on R. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*’. Translated by Alex Englander. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (3): 714–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12853>; and Bouché, Gilles, ed. 2020. *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*. New York, NY: Routledge.

⁷¹ Houlgate, Stephen. 2020. Review of *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology*, by Robert Brandom. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/a-spirit-of-trust-a-reading-of-hegels-phenomenology/>.

⁷² Given the extent of Hegel’s influence over his entire oeuvre, Brandom explicitly recognises that *A Spirit of Trust* might be better thought of as the work of a philosophical monster, one he himself christens “Bregel”. Brandom, Robert. 2021. ‘Replies to Honneth, McDowell, Pippin, and Stern’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (3): 757. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12852>.

⁷³ Brandom, 2019a, 230 and 23–4.

3.4.1.1 *Kant and Rational Reflection*

To understand why we might think of normative authority – the rationally binding force of rules – as instituted in and through socially articulated relations of reciprocal recognition requires that we first understand one of the principal shortcomings of Kant’s critical project. That shortcoming is the individualism of Kant’s account of the reflective institution of normative authority. As we shall see in Section 3.4.1.2, it is also what Hegel’s distinctively socio-political analysis is at least partly aimed at correcting. To understand what Kant gets wrong, however, we must first understand what he gets right.

For Brandom, the insight at the heart of Kant’s philosophical programme is what he calls the “attitude-dependence of normative statuses”: the idea that norms depend on our attitudes towards them for their institution, that genuinely authoritative norms do not exist independently of us but are instituted (partly) as a result of what we take the normative to be like.⁷⁴ “This is”, he continues, “the Enlightenment idea that there are no statuses of authority and responsibility apart from subjects’ practical attitudes of taking or treating each other *as* authoritative and responsible”.⁷⁵ As Brandom reads Kant, agents are

able to *bind* themselves normatively by their attitudes, to *make* themselves responsible (acquire an actual normative status) by *taking* themselves to be responsible (adopting a normative attitude). ... The resulting status is not just attitude-dependent (no attitude implies no status) but immediately instituted by the attitudes (attitude implies status).⁷⁶

For Kant, we institute the authority of norms by imposing their government upon our thought and action within the formal constraints imposed by the Categories and the Categorical Imperative respectively. In much the same way that many everyday speech acts such as promising, ordering, and baptising institute obligations and responsibilities in the very act of promising, ordering, and baptising (assuming that certain felicity conditions are met), so are we, simply in virtue of being rational, endowed with the normative power to alter the normative landscape just by taking it to be a certain way.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 14. It is important to note that Brandom’s account of the relation between norms and attitudes should not be “understood in an *eliminative* way: as saying that normative statuses are *nothing but* suitable constellations of normative attitudes, or that they do not exist at all, but correspond to more or less misleading ways of talking about constellations of attitudes”. Indeed, saying that norms are instituted by our attitudes towards them is not to say something about what they are, but “about how [they] came to be”. Brandom, 2019a, 275.

⁷⁵ Brandom, 2019a, 14.

⁷⁶ Brandom, 2019a, 270.

⁷⁷ See Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press. 94-107. See also Raz, Joseph. 2022. ‘Normative Powers’. In *The Roots of Normativity*, edited by Ulrike Heuer. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Brandom's contention is that Kant's account of the attitude-dependence of normative statuses is only one half of the story. For if Kant's account were all there was to tell, then we would be able to *immediately* make things the case just by taking them to be the case. Yet as Wittgenstein reminds us, this just means that "whatever is going to seem right to me is right", the upshot being that "here we can't talk about 'right'" (*PI* §258). It thus seems that Kant's insight has simply delivered us into the arms of the very conundrum we sought to escape. What we need, Wittgenstein continues, is a "criterion of correctness" (*PI* §258) against which our judgements about the normative can be assessed.

In response to this Wittgensteinian challenge, Kant argues that we achieve the critical distance between attitude and norm, assertion and assessment, necessary for the institution of normative authority through *rational reflection*, our perennial ability to subject our dispositions to critical scrutiny. That we must subject our dispositions to such scrutiny is precisely why it would not be unreasonable to consider the banner for Kant's entire critical project, stated in the *Preface* of the first *Critique*, to be: "Our age is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit" (*KrV* Axi). Indeed, so central is reflection to Kant's account of intentionality that Christine Korsgaard claims that "the human mind is self-conscious in the sense that it is essentially reflective".⁷⁸ For as she notes,

Even if we are inclined to believe that an action is right and even if we are inclined to be motivated by that fact, it is always possible for us to call our beliefs and motives into question. This is why, after all, we seek a philosophical foundation for ethics in the first place: because we are afraid that the true explanation of why we have moral beliefs and motives might not be one that sustains them.⁷⁹

For Kant, our capacity to subject our dispositions to the "court" (*KrV* Axi) of reason, to step back from our dispositions so that we might bring external evidential considerations to bear on them and determine if we *really* wish to endorse them, is fundamental to our nature as rational beings. It is what constitutes the inalienable dignity of rational agents, inducts them into the normative realm, and institutes the duty of other rational agents to respect that dignity. The central role that Kant reserves for reflection is what establishes

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192847003.003.0008> and Chang, Ruth. 2020. 'Do We Have Normative Powers?' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 94 (1): 275–300. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akaa012>.

⁷⁸ Korsgaard, Christine M. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 92.

⁷⁹ Korsgaard, 1996, 49.

the issue of higher-order evidence and the genealogical anxiety it produces – as examined in Section 1.3 – as one of the defining philosophical problems of modernity.

The problem with Kant’s appeal to rational reflection is that while reflection may indeed enable us to view ourselves with what P. F. Strawson calls the “objective attitude”, adopting such a perspective towards our discursive conduct can only take us so far.⁸⁰ For while reflection can, like double checking one’s working in a maths problem, correct one’s errors in *applying* a concept (what Brandom calls “mistakes of performance”), it offers no aid to those whose error lies in the mistaken *apprehension* of a concept (what he calls “mistakes of assessment”).⁸¹ Indeed, as George Sher notes, “an appeal to the validating effects of my reflections will not resolve my problem [in such a case], but will only reraise it at a higher level”.⁸² Since the performing and assessing agents are one and the same in reflection, this means, as Brandom continues, that there is no “room for a distinction between what is correct according to the norm and what the one whose performances are being assessed *takes* to be correct”, how we understand a particular concept *before* reflection just how we understand it *in* reflection.⁸³ Coming to realise that we have misunderstood the *meaning* of a term, that we have failed to grasp the rules governing its use, rather than just how to apply it requires something more. That reflection does not create an adequate gap between assertion and assessment is the principal failure of Kant’s account of normative authority.

3.4.1.2 *Hegel and the Essentially Social Nature of Normativity*

We are now in a position to introduce the first master idea of Brandom’s account: the idea that “the attitude-dependence of normative statuses must be balanced by appreciation of the ... status-dependence of normative attitudes”, that there is, in other words, a fundamental *reciprocity* between normative attitudes and normative statuses.⁸⁴ This means that norms not only depend on our attitudes for their institution; our attitudes also depend on the norms they are about. This is because our normative attitudes are answerable

⁸⁰ Strawson, P. F. 1962. ‘Freedom and Resentment’. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48: 194. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/4837/48p187.pdf>.

⁸¹ Brandom, 1994, 52.

⁸² Sher, George. 2001. ‘But I Could Be Wrong’. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 18 (2): 75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052500002909>.

⁸³ Brandom, 1994, 52. Interestingly, since the elements of one’s psyche that psychoanalysis targets are constitutive of the very subject undertaking psychoanalysis, this is precisely why psychoanalysts cannot analyse themselves.

⁸⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 263.

to the *contents* of the norms towards which they are directed, *what* the norms prescribe precisely the criterion of correctness against which they can be assessed and thereby exerting a distinctive kind of authority over our attitudes.⁸⁵ Indeed, “attitudes are correct”, Brandom claims, “just insofar as the subjects really do have the statuses of responsibility or authority that are acknowledged or attributed”.⁸⁶

It will no doubt be objected that this picture of normative authority is plainly circular. How can the content of our norms function as the standards of correctness to which our normative attitudes are beholden if our normative attitudes institute those very norms? Showing that this circularity is a virtuous one requires addressing two issues. One half of the answer requires that we examine how Brandom thinks the *content* of our attitudes are determined since it is precisely *what* we take to be the case that exercises authority over our attitudes. This is the issue to which we shall turn in Section 3.4.2. The other half of the answer requires that we examine what the normative authority of our normative attitudes consists in. This is the question that shall occupy us for the remainder of this section.

At bottom, Brandom’s Hegelian innovation is to transpose the issue of the institution of normative authority from the level of the agent to the level of the linguistic community. For while Kant thinks that we have no other means of reflecting on our understanding of the world except by availing ourselves of the very tools of the understanding, there is always another perspective we can adopt towards our own cognitions, a perspective that inescapably involves the understanding, but which crucially does not involve *our* understanding. I am talking, of course, of the perspective on our lives disclosed through the eyes of others. For although Korsgaard rightly elevates the critical distance necessary for assessment to the status of a condition of normativity as such, she nevertheless fails to realise that that distance can be supplied in and through others’ assessments of our performances by making available to us a genuinely third-personal perspective able to distinguish what we are *disposed* to say from what we really *ought* to say. Yet unlike the communitarian response to the rule-following paradox which imputes *immediately* instituting authority to whatever we collectively take to be the case, Brandom is able to qualify that authority by shifting the locus of attention to the intersubjective relations that *constitute* the discursive community in question, to what makes the ‘we’ doing the collective taking. This means that while normative authority enters the frame for Kant on the back of some irreducible, ultimately mysterious element of our fundamental nature, considering

⁸⁵ See Brandom, 2019a, 300.

⁸⁶ Brandom, 2019a, 15.

normative authority a socially-mediated phenomenon means that our attainment of the critical distance necessary for normative assessment is itself the product of entirely unmysterious norm-governed discursive practice. This also means that Hegel's decisive break with Kant does not consist in the socialisation of normative authority *per se*, but rather in the idea, as Brandom puts it, that "there is something fundamentally defective about the idea of normative attitudes that are *immediately constitutive* of normative statuses".⁸⁷ Considering normative authority a socially-mediated phenomenon enables us to overcome just this issue.

Embarking on the project of developing a socially-mediated account of normative authority requires introducing what Hilary Putnam calls a "division of linguistic labour", the idea that "every linguistic community ... possesses at least some terms whose associated 'criteria' are known only to a subset of the speakers who acquire the terms, and whose use by the other speakers depends upon a structured cooperation between them and the speakers in the relevant subsets".⁸⁸ For Putnam, speakers can legitimately use a range of terms even if they do not know the precise conditions in virtue of which their use would be considered correct or incorrect so long as some other speakers in their linguistic community do. This means that we can permissibly use a term just in case another member of the linguistic community is in a position to license or prohibit its use, a position they hold because they (are considered to) know when the content of the utterance in question applies and what it applies to. The underlying insight on which such a division of linguistic labour stands is the idea, as Brandom articulates it, that

we can make sense of the distinction between status and attitude only if in *acknowledging* a *responsibility* (committing oneself) one is at the same time *authorising others* to *hold* one responsible, by *attributing* that responsibility (commitment). They then can be understood as *administering a content* one has committed oneself to – a content that is *not* determined just by the attitudes of the acknowledger.⁸⁹

Analysing the semantic-epistemic distinction as a *social* distinction enables us to retain both the required distance between assertion and assessment necessary for normativity and to grasp exactly *what* we commit ourselves to (what we are assessed against) in assertion. Crucially, despite the distinction between the

⁸⁷ Brandom, 2019a, 277.

⁸⁸ Putnam, Hilary. 1975. "The Meaning of "Meaning"". In *Philosophical Papers*. Vol. 2: Mind, Language and Reality. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 227-8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625251.014>. See also Burge, Tyler. 1979. 'Individualism and the Mental'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4 (1): 73–121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1979.tb00374.x> and Dummett, Michael. 1978. "The Social Character of Meaning". In *Truth and Other Enigmas*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁸⁹ Brandom 2019, 301.

semantic and the epistemic, Putnam's insight does not rely on a two-stage metasemantic strategy. For whereas the division of semantic and epistemological labour characteristic of two-stage metasemantic strategies denotes an explanatory distinction *within* an agent's discursive conduct, Putnam's construal denotes a distinction *between* the agents comprising a linguistic community. Not only does this more accurately describe actual discursive practice, it also captures the deep interrelation between meaning and judgement since how a linguistic community generally uses a term and how a subset of experts authorised to determine how it *ought* to be used reciprocally inform one another.⁹⁰

This brings us to the crux of the problem of normative authority. For if the institution of the authority of a norm depends on an assertor to authorise an assessor to hold her responsible, then in what does the *assertor's* authority consist? And if normativity is possible because of the third-personal perspective offered by another member of one's linguistic community, then what is the source of *their* normative authority as an assessor? Indeed, while introducing a social division of semantic and epistemic labour avoids the metaphysical problems of basing Kant's account of normative authority on an inalienable power of reflection, we seem to have substituted for it, as Wilfrid Sellars so vividly puts it, a "picture of a great Hegelian serpent ... with its tail in its mouth" (*EPM_S* §38). What, in other words, promotes the *first* member of a linguistic community to the space of reasons?

Brandom's answer is *reciprocal recognition*. The basic idea is that while no agent can bootstrap themselves into the normative realm simply by taking themselves to inhabit it (as Kant would have us believe), agents reciprocally related to one another in a recognitive dyad can bootstrap *each other* into it by taking *each other* to inhabit it. For Kant, we enter into the space of reasons in virtue of our inherent dignity as rational beings. This means, as Brandom notes, that although norms are "instituted by immediately constitutive attitudes" according to which we really are subject to the norms we *take* ourselves to be subject to, the normative authority to *take* ourselves as subject to some norm "is not conceived as itself instituted by attitudes".⁹¹ Likewise, the *responsibility* we incur to acknowledge the authority of other agents to institute the norms they take themselves to be subject to "is also a status that is not itself instituted by attitudes",

⁹⁰ For a concrete example of socially navigated meaning determination, see the discussion of the definition of the term "jade" in Engelhardt, 2024, Ch. 2: De-Idealising Objective Type Externalism. See also LaPorte, Joseph. 2003. *Natural Kinds and Conceptual Change*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511527319>.

⁹¹ Brandom, 2019a, 280.

namely an agent's unconditional dignity *qua* rational.⁹² In this respect, both faces of the recognitive coin are, for Kant, just “constitutive of the status of being a rational, discursive being”, the story he retails about autonomy as self-imposed constraint by universally valid norms intended to express their entwinement.⁹³

For Brandom (and Hegel) on the other hand, the authority to attribute normative statuses *is itself* a status instituted by normative attitudes if – and this is the key point – those attributions are “*suitably socially complemented*”.⁹⁴ On this picture, “in order to institute the authority to institute statuses by one's attitudes ..., one must oneself be taken to have (be recognised as having) that authority by another, whom one in turn recognises as having that very same authority”.⁹⁵ The social-recognitive component of Brandom's account is hence an attempt to articulate the reciprocal structure of an agent's *authority* to attribute normative statuses – i.e., an agent's license to adopt assertoric attitudes expressing that one takes such and such to be the case – and their concomitant *responsibility* to acknowledge the similarly authoritative attributions of other agents. The appeal to reciprocal recognition is in this respect a means of demystifying the institution of our authority to institute authoritative norms.

How, then, does reciprocal recognition institute the authority to institute norms? The basic idea is that if an agent *A* deems another agent *B* to be authorised to attribute genuinely authoritative normative statuses, if, that is, *A* deems what *B takes* to be the case to *actually* be the case, then if *B* reciprocally *takes A* to be able to attribute genuinely authoritative norms, then *A* is committed to regarding herself as *actually* able to attribute genuinely authoritative norms. Since this same reasoning symmetrically applies to *B*, she is also committed to regarding herself as *actually* able to attribute genuinely authoritative norms. And since both *A* and *B* mutually recognise that they regard each other as authorised to attribute genuinely authoritative normative statuses, both have no choice but to recognise both their own and the other's normative statuses as authoritative recognisers as genuine. As Jack Samuel puts it, when the object of one's recognitive attributions is an agent one deems to be as a recogniser, one “classifies the other as something that can attribute normative significance. In other words, to recognise another as a recogniser is to recognise

⁹² Brandom, 2019a, 280.

⁹³ Brandom, 2019a, 280.

⁹⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 282.

⁹⁵ Brandom, 2019a, 282.

that its relationship with its environment is significance-granting”.⁹⁶ This means that should one attribute to another agent the authority to attribute authority, one is thereby committed to acknowledging the authority of their attributions. Should they in turn reciprocally attribute authority to oneself, one attains the normative status of an agent authorised to attribute authority because recognising an agent as authoritative is to be committed to recognising the authority of what they recognise over one’s own attributions of authority. By the same reasoning, taking oneself to be an authoritative recogniser, because recognised as a recogniser by another recognised as a recogniser, implicitly incurs a correlative *responsibility* to recognise the authority of others who take themselves to be authoritative recognisers. As Samuel continues,

This gets to the fundamental disagreement between the Kantian and post-Kantian conceptions of reflective self-consciousness: the Kantian thinks that one can first achieve reflective distance from one’s own inclinations, and then take oneself to be a recogniser of recognisers, thereby attributing that same power to others, without first coming to recognise oneself as recognised by a recogniser like oneself. The post-Kantian insists that reflective distance in the first place presupposes the kind of distinctively normative pushback one gets from others with whom one stands in mutually recognitive relations On the post-Kantian view we are awakened to ourselves, and thus achieve reflective distance from our own inclinations, by recognising that we are being recognised, and thus recognising the other reciprocally.⁹⁷

For Brandom, this means that the recognitive dyad formed by two agents reciprocally recognising each other “lift[s] the attitudes of *both*” into the normative realm, the normative statuses each take to obtain “not immediately instituted by recognitive attitudes” but rather “instituted by suitably socially complemented recognitive attitudes”.⁹⁸ This ultimately means that genuinely binding rational norms are instituted on the social-recognitive model not in virtue of the attitudes we bear towards them, but in virtue of the intersubjective attitudes we bear towards each other.

The speech act at the core of Brandom’s account of reciprocal recognition is, according to Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) and Mark Lance, the “vocative”, the class of speech acts one utters in recognising another agent *as* that agent such as ‘You there!’ or ‘Hey Jim!’.⁹⁹ If a vocative is to come off

⁹⁶ Samuel, Jack. 2022. ‘Toward a Post-Kantian Constructivism’. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 9 (53): 1464. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.3116>.

⁹⁷ Samuel, 2022, 1466.

⁹⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 283.

⁹⁹ Kukla, Rebecca, and Mark Lance. 2009. *‘Yo!’ and ‘Lo!’: The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 134.

successfully, it must be understood “not just as entitled for or targeting this or that agent”, but as “essentially *from me to you*”.¹⁰⁰ This may at first not appear particularly noteworthy. Given the communicative function of linguistic exchange, most speech acts, even empirical declaratives in principle utterable by all, are typically uttered by particular agents towards other particular agents. However, vocatives are unique among speech acts insofar as they are “irreducibly heard and owned as *mine* and as *yours*”, appropriate utterance and appropriate uptake both specific to the agents involved.¹⁰¹ This is because uttering a vocative does not *report* that I have recognised someone as some agent (as would the declarative “That’s my friend over there”), but rather *establishes* a normative relationship between the agents involved. As Kukla and Lance continue, a vocative thereby “places claims and burdens upon the one called, in part by demanding acknowledgment of this very establishment and engagement It *calls for* a response and hence draws the one called into a direct . . . normative relationship with the caller”.¹⁰² This means, however, that the vocative ineliminably involves reciprocal recognition between caller and hearer. As Kukla and Lance put it,

To utter a vocative is to *call* another person – in calling out “Hello, Eli!” I *recognise* the fact that that person there is Eli, and I do so *by calling upon him* to recognise that he has been properly recognised. . . . You cannot hail someone unless you recognise that he is there to be hailed, and part of what your hail expresses is this very recognition The vocative demand that the one called appropriately acknowledge the call is not a separate pragmatic component of the hail over and above its recognitive function. Rather, it is *how it carries out that recognitive function*. This is why “Lo! Richard” is a very different speech act from “Yo! Richard”; both recognise Richard, but the first makes a claim with an agent-neutral output – it recognises the publicly available, shared fact of Richard’s presence (and would be quite odd if directed at Richard) – whereas the second, in calling for a response specifically *from Richard*, has an agent-relative (and agent-specific) output.¹⁰³

This means that vocatives are felicitous *regardless* of the normative attitude of the agent to which they are directed since they come off even if one *declines* the demand for acknowledgement contained in the vocative. For were one to *deny* that they were the agent being called (as in a case of mistaken identity), the very fact of issuing the denial means that one cannot but recognise oneself *as* the agent to whom the call was directed. Even if one were to *ignore* the call, one must still recognise themselves as the agent to whom it was initially

¹⁰⁰ Kukla and Lance, 2009, 135-6. See also Kenaan, Hagi. 2005. *The Present Personal: Philosophy and the Hidden Face of Language*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

¹⁰¹ Kukla and Lance, 2009, 135.

¹⁰² Kukla and Lance, 2009, 141.

¹⁰³ Kukla and Lance, 2009, 138.

directed, an acknowledgement which implicitly accedes to its legitimacy. Denial is transformed into *refusal*, ignorance into a *snub*, both of which implicitly recognise the vocative's demand for response as genuinely authoritative. It is this property of vocatives which makes recognition, so say Kukla and Lance, essential to the constitution of normative subjects.¹⁰⁴ For reasons we shall examine in Section 4.4.3, the fact that vocatives do not admit of refusal and cannot be rebuffed is why recognition is an essentially political, power-imblicated relation which, as Kukla and Lance note, “can easily be received as abusive, burdensome, or obtrusive”.¹⁰⁵

The crux of Kukla and Lance's account is that “*each* felicitous speech act contains a vocative, second-personal call”, that all speech involves an implicit vocative element.¹⁰⁶ For as they rightly note, every attempt to update the discursive score implies a call for *uptake* from at least one other discursive participant if the proposed update is to be assessed appropriately, i.e., independently of the speaker's disposition to assent. Even third-personal speech acts such as declaratives come bundled with a vocative element insofar as “the teller calls upon the told to put her trust in *this particular* directed speech act and the normative relationship of trust and responsibility in which it is embedded”.¹⁰⁷ This means that alongside whatever other discursive dynamics it might have, every attempt to update the discursive score implicitly contains a social-recognitive dimension of analysis.

Brandom dubs this ubiquitous social-recognitive dynamic implicit in all discursive practice “general recognition”.¹⁰⁸ As opposed to the special case of two agents specifically recognising each other as recognisers (what he calls “specific recognition”), general recognition articulates the basic recognitive structure obtaining between recognising agents regardless of *what* each agent recognises some object of cognition *as*: recogniser as recogniser, human as agent, copper as ferromagnetic.¹⁰⁹ For as outlined above, the vocative dimension of speech implicit in every attempt to update the discursive score commits one to recognising the normative authority of every speaker whose utterances one grants uptake, even if that uptake

¹⁰⁴ For an extensive analysis of the role that the vocative plays in the constitution of the subject, an analysis that Kukla and Lance themselves draw on, see Althusser, Louis. 2014. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. London, UK: Verso.

¹⁰⁵ Kukla and Lance, 2009, 141.

¹⁰⁶ Kukla and Lance, 2009, 154.

¹⁰⁷ Kukla and Lance, 2009, 167.

¹⁰⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 277-85.

¹⁰⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 285-90.

takes the form of a rebuttal. Agents are thus inculcated into the space of reasons just in the normal process of discursive practice precisely because every instance of linguistic exchange involves general recognition whether explicitly acknowledged or not. This explains both why normativity is irreducibly social and how it emerges from intersubjective discursive interaction.

To briefly conclude, there are two primary advantages of Brandom's social-recognitive account of the institution of normative authority. Firstly, by baking the distinction between assertion and assessment into the ground level of the account, Brandom's account retains the critical distance between one's disposition to assent and whether one ought to assent required for normativity. And secondly, that genuinely authoritative norms of linguistic conduct emerge just in the process of their use means that we avoid reliance on a two-stage metasemantic strategy and can thereby avoid the regress-circularity double-bind forced on us by the seemingly compulsory choice between regulism and regularism.

3.4.2 The Historical-Recollective Determination of Semantic Content

The second component of Brandom's argument we shall examine (the third component of his account overall) is the master idea around which his project revolves and which brings its other components into alignment: the historical-recollective account of the determination of conceptual content. The idea that language – and intentionality *tout court* – is essentially and irreducibly social has been a mainstay of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy. Without additional elaboration, however, this can lead to a communitarian view of rule-following which merely relocates the problem of the contingency of our dispositions to go on and to assess others' dispositions to go on from the level of the individual to the level of the community. The question, as Brandom understands it, is that

If we make the norms (institute them by our social-practical attitudes), then how can they genuinely bind us? In what sense are we constrained by them? The worry is that if we get to decide (our practical attitudes determine) not only *that* we are responsible (a matter of Fregean force or normative status), but *what* we are responsible for (the content of the responsibility), then it is hard to see how we have normatively *bound* ourselves at all.¹¹⁰

In what, in other words, does the bindingness of normative authority consist?

¹¹⁰ Brandom, 2019a, 13.

Brandom's novel philosophical proposal is to couple a *historical* dimension of analysis to the social-recognitive component of his account as a means of deriving determinate standards of assessment from a concept's actual history of use.¹¹¹ This historical dimension of analysis makes visible the conceptual *content* of the norms instituted in reciprocal recognition, *what* the norms commit us to. According to Brandom, we determine how we have been normatively bound through the "retrospective recollective rational reconstruction of a course of experience", a process I dubbed 'rationalising genealogy' in Section 2.7.¹¹² On this picture, we identify a concept's content by reconstructing a sequence of concept uses which can retrospectively be seen to constitute a tradition expressing its content. The content thus determined is what has implicitly governed the concept's use all along and thus binds our use of it into the future. It is this part of Brandom's picture which provides an answer to the rule-following paradox insofar as it details how we give "contingent concrete actuality the normative form of necessity", how, as Friedrich Nietzsche puts it, we "redeem that which has passed away and ... re-create all 'It was' into a 'Thus I willed it!'"¹¹³ With the meanings of our terms a function of the judgements in which they figure and the contents of our judgements a function of the meanings of the terms they contain, Brandom thereby provides a robust use-based account of meaning that meets the demands of a one-stage metasemantic strategy. This is also why his response to the rule-following paradox is of genuine philosophical significance and hence why this strategy for releasing us from the clutches of genealogical anxiety demands sustained attention.

In order to understand Brandom's account of retrospective recollective rational reconstruction, we must first understand the problem it aims to solve. Just what does a historical-recollective dimension of analysis achieve that the social-recognitive component of Brandom's account alone cannot? Indeed, it might seem that the social-recognitive component of his argument already meets the challenge of the rule-following paradox quite successfully: through socially-mediated reciprocal recognition, we ensure that our meanings retain normative authority over our future conduct by submitting ourselves to the assessments of our peers in such a way as to establish the distance between performance and assessment necessary for a

¹¹¹ See Brandom, 2019a, 371.

¹¹² Brandom, 2019a, 430.

¹¹³ Brandom, 2019a, 17 and Nietzsche, Friedrich. 2005. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*. Translated by Graham Parkes. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. II:20. For an overview of how Brandom sees his account as responding to the rule-following paradox, see Brandom, 2019a, 16 and 752-3. See also *PR_H* §118Z: "The development in the realm of existence of the contradiction which is contained in the *necessity of the finite* is simply the transformation of necessity into contingency and *vice versa*".

notion of normative fit to get a foothold. The issue with this picture, however, is that the *content* of the norms instituted in and through reciprocal recognition goes missing. This means that while we may have a plausible account of the genuinely binding rational *authority* of norms, precisely *what* those norms commit us to remains unresolved. The plausibility of Brandom's overarching project depends on providing just such an account since it is precisely the contents of the norms instituted by our attitudes that our attitudes are answerable to. Indeed, it is this requirement which articulates Brandom's endeavour to avoid what Sellars calls the "notorious 'ing-ed' ambiguity of 'experience'" (*EPM*_S §24): the fact that what is *believed* is what determines the correctness of the *believing*. Since it is the *contents* of our norms that constrains *which* norms can be instituted, this means that we must articulate an account of those contents if we are to complete the circle of reciprocal authority of attitudes over statuses and statuses over attitudes, the hinge on which Hegel's revision of the Kantian model of discursive normativity pivots. The temporal dimension of Brandom's account is precisely what provides the other half of that story.

3.4.2.1 *Content Without History*

We can make the argumentative function of the historical-recollective component of Brandom's account visible by contrasting it with a comparably socialised account of norm-governed discursive practice: Stephen Darwall's ethically substantive account of practical agency. Like Brandom, Darwall contends that normative authority emerges as a result of the structures of intersubjective relations. But unlike Brandom, Darwall argues that such an account is sufficient to determine precisely *what* those authoritative norms prescribe for us. Understanding why this is unsatisfactory without supplementation will help us to understand what it is about the *history* of a norm's employment in belief and judgement that is necessary for the task of determining its content.

Like Brandom, Darwall turns to one of the great post-Kantian thinkers to furnish his account of practical agency. But while Brandom turns to Hegel, Darwall turns to Johann Fichte.¹¹⁴ For Darwall (as for Brandom and Hegel), agency is an essentially social affair in the sense that, as Samuel puts it, "being an agent requires already standing in recognitive relations with actual, concrete others".¹¹⁵ This is because a condition

¹¹⁴ See Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. 2000. *Foundations of Natural Right: According to the Principles of the Wissenschaftslehre*. Edited by Frederick Neuhouser. Translated by Michael Baur. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

¹¹⁵ Samuel, 2022, 1458.

on the possibility of practical agency is the capacity to occupy what Darwall calls “the second-person standpoint”, the practical standpoint we adopt “when we make and acknowledge claims on one another’s conduct and will”.¹¹⁶ Adopting the second-personal standpoint makes us alive to so-called “second-personal reasons”, the kind of reasons invoked in “lay[ing] a claim or address[ing] a purportedly valid demand”.¹¹⁷ Second-personal reasons are distinctive not only in the sense that they target a specific agent, but also in the sense that they are intelligible to that other agent “only if he [*sic*] also accepts your authority to demand this of him (second-personally)”.¹¹⁸ In contrast to what Darwall calls “state- or outcome-based reason”, according to which rational motivation involves “access[ing] ... a reason that is there anyway”, “a second-personal reason is one whose validity depends on presupposed authority and accountability relations between persons and, therefore, on the possibility of the reason’s being addressed person-to-person”.¹¹⁹ This means that like Brandom, Darwall contends that practical agency rests on an account of normative authority. But while Brandom seeks to ground normative authority on a demystifying account of reciprocal recognition, Darwall seeks to do so on the basis of its relation to a cluster of interdefinable ethical notions, central among which is “the authority to make a demand or claim” since making an “authorised claim creates a distinctive reason for compliance (a second-personal reason)”.¹²⁰ The specifically Fichtean idea that Darwall introduces is the idea that “any second-personal claim or ‘summons’ (*Aufforderung*) presupposes a *common* competence, authority, and, therefore, responsibility as free and rational, a *mutual* second-personality that addresser and addressee share and that is appropriately recognised *reciprocally* [my emphasis]”.¹²¹ Just as Kukla and Lance identify the vocative implicit in all linguistic activity as an irresistible ‘call’ to the normative realm, so too does Darwall (through Fichte) contend that claims or demands “‘summon’ persons to determine themselves freely by second-personal reasons”.¹²²

So far so familiar. Where Darwall’s account differs from Brandom’s lies in the kinds of conclusions he thinks we are entitled to draw from the form of second-personal reason in which normative authority

¹¹⁶ Darwall, Stephen. 2006. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 3.

¹¹⁷ Darwall, 2006, 7.

¹¹⁸ Darwall, 2006, 8.

¹¹⁹ Darwall, 2006, 5, 8.

¹²⁰ Darwall, 2006, 11.

¹²¹ Darwall, 2006, 21. See also Kukla and Lance, 2009, 142.

¹²² Darwall, 2006, 21.

consists, namely that “assuming a second-person standpoint ... commits us ... to the equal dignity of free and rational persons”.¹²³ This means that standing in reciprocal cognitive relations with other agents by adopting a second-person standpoint not only institutes the *force* of normative discourse, i.e., what gives it general normative form, but commits us to at least some specific morally substantive claims about those agents, namely that, as Samuel puts it, “we must respect their equal dignity, which is the substantive basis for modern liberal morality”.¹²⁴ This means that on Darwall’s cognitive picture, adopting the essentially social perspective from which practical agency arises is sufficient for incurring determinate normative obligations. Darwall’s account, like Kant’s metaethical constructivism, thus rests on what we might call a *derivative* account of the relation between agency and morality insofar as the *content* of morality – its obligations, permissions, rights, and responsibilities – is taken to be derivable from the bare nature of practical agency.¹²⁵ As we shall see, this is precisely the idea that Brandom seeks to distance himself from.¹²⁶

The problem with Darwall’s strategy is, as Samuel notes, that no “theory of agency thin enough to be uncontroversial” will be rich enough to supply “requirements thick enough to approximate morality”.¹²⁷ Indeed, as Hegel’s famous “empty formalism” objection to the Categorical Imperative claims, attempting to achieve the universality of scope ostensibly necessary for morality by founding a moral system on nothing but the broadest requirements of practical agency leaves the specific obligations and rights we are subject

¹²³ Darwall, 2006, 23.

¹²⁴ Samuel, 2022, 1470.

¹²⁵ I draw here on Samuel’s suggestion that Kant and Fichte present what he calls “*deductive* account[s] of the agency-morality relation” while distancing myself from the idea that the contents of morality can – strictly speaking – be *deduced* from an account of agency. Samuel, 2022, 1471. Jürgen Habermas pursues the same strategy in the realm of normative political theory, viz. aiming, as Brandom puts it, “to extract substantive political conclusions from a philosophical investigation of language”. Brandom, 2000b, 172. See also Brandom, Robert. 2015. “Towards Reconciling Two Heroes: Habermas and Hegel”. *Argumenta* 1 (1). <https://doi.org/10.14275/2465-2334/20151.BRA.33>.

¹²⁶ One of the more notable tensions in *A Spirit of Trust* is, I think, to be found between Brandom’s claim that his is not an account of normativity derivable from the basic structure of agency and his reading of Hegel as presenting a “semantics with an edifying intent”, the idea that the account of discursive normativity able to be extracted from the *Phenomenology* imposes determinate obligations on how we ought to relate to one another. It is simply not clear to me how these two claims might be reconciled. I do not press the issue further because, as we shall see in Section 4.4, there are deeper problems with Brandom’s picture which more closely relate to genealogical inquiry and genealogical anxiety.

¹²⁷ Samuel, 2022, 1470.

and entitled to underdetermined in concrete cases.¹²⁸ This means, as Sharon Street puts it, that “morality does not follow from pure practical reason”, nor can anything worthy of the name.¹²⁹

For our purposes, the key takeaway from this discussion is that if we are to consider norms determinately contentful, then we require more than just an explanation of the process of their institution. The fact that Darwall’s account is, like Brandom’s, irreducibly social highlights that the move from the individual to the social is on its own not enough to make a commensurate move from normative authority to conceptual content.¹³⁰ It is precisely in respect of this point that Brandom distinguishes between the social-recognitive and historical-recollective components of his argument, the principal motive for introducing the latter precisely to compensate for this shortcoming.

3.4.2.2 *Retrospective Recollective Rational Reconstruction*

With the stage now set, we can begin to reconstruct Brandom’s historical-recollective account of the determination of conceptual content, what he claims is the beating heart of the *Phenomenology* and acclaims as Hegel’s principal innovation. As Brandom sees it, this component of his account describes the underlying dynamics implicit in the normal process of experience. As such, while we need not consciously retail the kind of story Brandom presents in every episode of experience, we should, all being well, in principle be able to do so.

For Brandom, the content of our concepts is determined by a recollectively *biperspectival* process. It is biperspectival in the sense that conceptual content is at one and the same time retrospectively *found* and

¹²⁸ See *PR_H* §135.

¹²⁹ Street, Sharon. 2012. ‘Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason’. In *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, edited by James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 56. See also Samuel, 2022, 1450. For another argument against the prospects of derivative accounts of the relation between agency and morality, see Enoch, David. 2006. ‘Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won’t Come from What Is Constitutive of Action’. *The Philosophical Review* 115 (2): 169–98. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2005-014>.

¹³⁰ Brandom himself notes that the inferential semantics he develops in *Making It Explicit* fails on just this point since he simply “take[s] for granted the availability to scorekeeping linguistic practitioners of conceptual contents that were determinate” while failing to “address[...] the question of where such determinate contents and their associated norms came from, and how they could be understood to be available to practitioners”. Brandom, 2019a, 766. For another critique of the project of *Making It Explicit*, see McDowell, John. 2013. ‘How Not to Read *Philosophical Investigations*: Brandom’s Wittgenstein’. In *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

prospectively *made*, each side reciprocally related to the other in and through the dynamic structure of phenomenal experience. As Brandom articulates it,

Viewed prospectively, the process of experience is one of progressively determining conceptual contents in the sense of *making* those contents more determinate, by applying them or withholding their application in novel circumstances. This is the perspective that makes visible the attitude-dependence of normative statuses: the conferral of meaning by use. Viewed retrospectively, the process of experience is one of determining conceptual contents in the sense of progressively *finding out* more about the boundaries of concepts that show up as having implicitly all along already been fully determinate. This is the perspective that makes visible the status-dependence of normative attitudes: meaning or conceptual content as normatively governing applications or uses of it.¹³¹

This biperspectival approach means that the process of recollection ought to be thought of “as a process both of ever greater *determination* of conceptual contents and of ever greater *expression* of them”.¹³² It is for this reason that Brandom explicitly calls recollection an “*expressive genealogy*”.¹³³

Let’s unpack Brandom’s proposal further. Understood *retrospectively*, recollection “*rationalises* a course of experience by retrospectively redescribing it so as to exhibit it as *expressively progressive*”.¹³⁴ Retrospective recollection is the process by which we fix the contents of our concepts. We exhibit a course of experience as expressively progressive by retrospectively “selecting a trajectory through [a concept’s] actual uses that picks out a sequence [of uses] ... [which] has the form of the gradual, cumulative revelation, the emergence into ever-greater explicitness, of the contours of a determinately contentful norm that is seen to have been implicit all along” in all of the concept’s previous uses.¹³⁵ To describe a sequence of concept uses as expressively progressive is, in other words, to view a concept’s actual history of use in such a way as to make sense of it as norm-governed, as responsive to the actual reasons standing for and against it. Rational reconstruction thus consists in retrospectively selecting, out of all the actual uses of a particular concept and ignoring any retrograde steps, an Ariadne’s thread of discursive episodes by which the content implicitly

¹³¹ Brandom, 2019a, 17.

¹³² Brandom, 2019a, 452.

¹³³ Brandom, 2019a, 437.

¹³⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 370.

¹³⁵ Brandom, 2019a, 17.

governing the concept's use can be construed as being made progressively more and more explicit.¹³⁶ That content is implicit insofar as it is what has

normatively governed applications of the concept, in the dual sense of serving as a normative standard for assessments of the correctness of those applications and as what those applications were subjunctively sensitive to, in that according to the recollective rationalisation of them, if the norm *had* had a different content, the applications *would have* been different.¹³⁷

Episodes of experience are eligible for inclusion in such a reconstruction just in case they exhibit these dual criteria. For, as Brandom continues, “each experiential episode must reveal (express) some further aspect of a determinately contentful norm according to which it is taken to be correct (a deontic normative matter) and to which it is taken to have been sensitive (an alethic modal matter)”.¹³⁸ It is through this process that “what is implicit is made more and more explicit” in the sense that “more and more of how the world really is, what is actually materially incompatible with what in the objective alethic sense becomes incorporated in material incompatibilities deontically acknowledged by subjects”.¹³⁹ It is for this reason that Brandom compares the process of retrospective reconstruction to that of a “Whiggish history” insofar as its selective developmental history serves to legitimate its end product *post hoc*.¹⁴⁰ Each contingent stage of that history is made necessary “not in the prospective sense that things could not have happened otherwise ... but in the retrospective expressive sense that if they had *not* happened, some aspect of what the story claims was all along implicit would not have become explicit”.¹⁴¹ What is implicit in that story, encoded in the patterns of deontic scorekeeping that structure linguistic exchange, is the norm governing the concept's application.¹⁴² Rational reconstruction is the process by which that norm is made explicit. This means, according to Brandom, that we determine the content of our concepts by rationally reconstructing the implicit norm which, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see had been governing its uses all along. It is that norm which determines the correctness or incorrectness of its future uses, not once and for all, but

¹³⁶ See Brandom, 2019a, 438.

¹³⁷ Brandom, 2019a, 17.

¹³⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 17.

¹³⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 432 and 101.

¹⁴⁰ Brandom, 2019a, 438.

¹⁴¹ Brandom, 2019a, 438.

¹⁴² See Lewis, David. 1979. ‘Scorekeeping in a Language Game’. *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8: 339–59. <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1007/BF00258436>.

until the novel circumstances we encounter in experience require new concept applications, and hence new rational reconstructions. This is how we progressively develop a conceptual repertoire ever more apt to reality.

Understood *prospectively*, the determination of conceptual content is a matter of *making* things thus and so by *taking* them thus and so in the sense that the concept applications available for incorporation into a retrospective reconstruction depend on our prior judgements, on our practices of applying or withholding a particular concept to or from a given state of affairs. It is up to us to determine whether or not a particular case warrants the application of a particular concept since whether or not we take the circumstances to warrant the ascription of some content is a matter of what we take to be the case in belief and judgement. This is not to say that it is up to us to settle the correctness or incorrectness of that determination; that is a matter for our peers, both contemporaneously in reciprocal recognition and asynchronously in recollective reconstruction. Nor, as Wittgenstein warns, is it to say that each application of a concept requires that we make “a new decision ... at every stage” (*PI* §186).¹⁴³ Rather, it is to say that the meanings of our terms are made in and through the concrete practice of “applying them or withholding their application in novel circumstances”, practices into which we are initiated just in the process of acquiring a language.¹⁴⁴ For in judging that some state of affairs warrants the ascription of some content in the process of concept application, we implicitly assert that the application in question ought to be added to the Ariadne’s thread making that content progressively more explicit, thereby retroactively reconfiguring the significance of every prior ascription of that content.¹⁴⁵ This means that on this picture the meanings of our terms are determined in virtue of sentences held true and that what we hold true is in part determined by what we take ourselves to mean. This component of Brandom’s account therefore meets the explanatory demands of a one-stage metasemantic strategy.

¹⁴³ See also *BB* 143.

¹⁴⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 17.

¹⁴⁵ This prospective view of the historical component of Brandom’s account is what enables Brandom to address the problem encountered by his inferential semantics highlighted in fn. 130 in Section 3.4.2.1. For the issue there was that the content of the assertions tracked in linguistic scorekeeping was taken for granted and that how scorekeepers accessed that content ultimately mysterious. Now, however, since the content of our terms depends upon a process we undertake towards our own concept applications, there is nothing magical about how semantic content is made available to linguistic practitioners at all.

Brandom cashes out the relationship between the retrospective and prospective aspects of rational reconstruction in terms of Fregean sense and reference.¹⁴⁶ Regarded retrospectively, rational reconstruction is the process by which conceptual content is revealed *to* consciousness. From this perspective, rational reconstruction exhibits how a concept's *referent*, what we are using the concept to talk and think *about*, sets the standards against which its *sense* is to be assessed since it is precisely what the referent is actually like which determines how closely the representations in which the concept features accord with reality. Rational reconstruction is in this respect the means by which our concept use is brought progressively closer to how things are anyway, how we *discover* what the senses have, with greater or lesser fidelity, all along attempted to express.

Regarded prospectively, rational reconstruction is the process by which conceptual content is determined *by* consciousness. From this perspective, rational reconstruction exhibits how a concept's *sense*, the content the concept expresses, progressively incorporates more and more determinate features of what its *referent* is actually like through the construction of an Ariadne's thread of concept uses capable of expressing the referent as it actually is. In this respect, rational reconstruction is the means by which our concept use is *made* closer to how things are anyway, how we incorporate the referents into the senses which determine them and thereby endow them with normative significance.

Crucially, Brandom argues that “talk of the process of sequentially and progressively *determining* (making more determinate) disparate senses, and talk of the process of sequentially and progressively *expressing* (making more explicit) referents are two ways of talking about the *same* process”.¹⁴⁷ In order to understand this claim, it is vital to distinguish between two ways of understanding the conceptual dependency relating each side of the biperspectival process to the other. Brandom draws a distinction between what he calls “sense-dependence” relations and “reference-dependence” relations.¹⁴⁸ A concept is *sense*-dependent on another just in case it is not possible to understand the former without understanding the latter. The concept ‘triangle’ is thus sense-dependent on the concept ‘three-sided’ because if one is to

¹⁴⁶ See Frege, Gottlob. 1948. ‘Sense and Reference’. *The Philosophical Review* 57 (3): 209–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2181485>. For further discussion of this Fregean exposition of recollection, see Brandom, 2019a, 438–40.

¹⁴⁷ Brandom, 2019a, 452. Rational reconstruction *determines* conceptual content in both the epistemic and constitutive senses of the word since it is the process by which we both tell what the contents are and give our utterances the contents that they have.

¹⁴⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 206–7.

count as understanding the former, they must also understand the latter. A concept is *reference*-dependent on another just in case it is not possible for there to *be* referents of the former without referents of the latter. The concept ‘the sinking of the Titanic’ is thus referent-dependent on the concept ‘iceberg’ because the former would not have referred to anything had there been none of the latter.¹⁴⁹ Having drawn this distinction, we can now see that the *determining* side of the recollective process establishes the *sense*-dependence relations between our concepts while its *expressive* side establishes the *reference*-dependence relations between the referents with which they are associated.

The crux of the matter for Brandom is that recollection, viewed in its entirety, is *neither* solely sense-dependent *nor* solely reference-dependent. For while “the former relates senses to senses, and the latter referents to referents, ... recollection *relates senses to referents* [my emphasis]”.¹⁵⁰ This is why, as Brandom puts it, the process of “recollectively *making* new senses is how one *finds* the referents”.¹⁵¹ It is also why Brandom claims that it is the *content* of our concepts that exerts normative authority over the discursive practices in which they figure. For while it is indeed we who bind ourselves by the norms which have all along implicitly governed our concept uses in and through the retrospective reconstruction of referent-denoting senses, *what* we are thereby bound by is given by the progressively revealed referents they are about.

To illustrate just how the historical-recollective component of his account is supposed to work, Brandom repeatedly avails himself of an example from jurisprudence: the judge at common law.¹⁵² Consider the deliberative process that a common law judge undertakes when presiding over a case.¹⁵³ What are the reasons available to her to justify her legal determinations? In a statute-based system, the legitimate reasons to which a judge can appeal are set out in an explicit corpus of legislation. The judge’s role is hence to apply the corpus to novel cases and to arbitrate between competing interpretations of that corpus in such a way as to (artificially) bring the regress of interpretations to a halt on the basis of the normative authority with

¹⁴⁹ By distinguishing between these two forms of conceptual dependence, Brandom is thereby able to allay the common objection that Hegel’s dialectic leads to the unacceptable conclusion that the external world is not mind-independent. For while Hegel’s account would indeed be utterly implausible were he to think of the relationship between determination and expression in terms of *reference*-dependence, that is not how he conceives of things.

¹⁵⁰ Brandom, 2019a, 372.

¹⁵¹ Brandom, 2019a, 452.

¹⁵² In particular, see Brandom, 2019a, 449-51, 564-5, and 601-3. See also Brandom, Robert. 2014. ‘A Hegelian Model of Legal Concept Determination: The Normative Fine Structure of the Judges’ Chain Novel’. In *Pragmatism, Law, and Language*, edited by Graham Hubbs and Douglas Lind. New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203797969>.

¹⁵³ We briefly examined this analogy in Section 2.7.

which she is invested, a regress which could in principle continue unabated. By contrast, as Brandom notes, the judge at common law is permitted to invoke only the prior determinations of other judges “according to the norm implicit in the tradition of prior applications of it”.¹⁵⁴ This means that the task for the judge at common law is not how to halt the regress of interpretations of a given statute, but to make explicit the norm she takes to implicitly govern the jurisprudential tradition she contingently inherits. The key point is that just as rational reconstruction is at one and the same time a retrospective finding and prospective making of conceptual contents, so too can we understand the activity of the judge at common law as the simultaneous finding of the norms implicitly governing the legal tradition constituted by the determinations she inherits and as the making of new norms which advance that tradition.

This construal of the common law judge’s activity establishes a direct connection between Brandom’s historical-recollective account of conceptual content and our analysis of genealogical inquiry. For just as the rule-following paradox threatens to reduce our norm-governed performances to mere dispositions, it is, as Ronald Dworkin notes, an adage of jurisprudence that “law is ... only a matter of what the judges eat for breakfast”.¹⁵⁵ While fanciful, the idea, as Brandom puts it, is that “in each of the prior cases appealed to in justifying a contemporary judgment it may be possible to explain the earlier decision by appealing to what *caused* the judgment, rather than what *reasons* there were for it”, that the common law judge’s decisions are, in other words, naturalistically explicable in terms of rationally and judicially extraneous factors.¹⁵⁶ This means that every common law judgement is in principle vulnerable to genealogical undermining because, as he continues, “*had* various judges happened to have had different ‘breakfasts’ ..., the current content of the concept *would have been* different”.¹⁵⁷ It is hence difficult to see how a process of rational reconstruction is supposed to render the contents of our concepts determinate at all.

The key point for Brandom is that while the cases the judge at common law inherits from the legal tradition of which she is a part are a matter of sheer contingency, what she does with them is, viewed

¹⁵⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 601.

¹⁵⁵ Dworkin, Ronald. 1981. ‘Dissent on Douglas’. *The New York Review of Books*, 19 February 1981. 4. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1981/02/19/dissent-on-douglas/>.

¹⁵⁶ Brandom, 2019a, 564. Perhaps worryingly, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that the adage may not be as fanciful as it seems. See Danziger, Shai, Jonathan Levav, and Liora Avnaim-Pesso. 2011. ‘Extraneous Factors in Judicial Decisions’. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108 (17): 6889–92. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1018033108>.

¹⁵⁷ Brandom, 2019a, 565.

retrospectively, constrained by the content of the norm made explicit in the process of weaving the cases she deems precedentially significant into a rational reconstruction. Viewed prospectively however, that same process of reconstruction is one within whose constraints she is free to exercise her agency insofar as which cases she chooses to ascribe precedential significance to, which she considers irrelevant, and so on is up to her. Likewise, we, in the midst of the discursive practices into which we find ourselves thrown, cannot choose which language we speak or the conceptual repertoire we inherit. And yet at the same time we find ourselves both bound by the content that our concepts express and free to make them express what they express. This is precisely why the pragmatic process of incorporating the contingency of our situation into a narrative that retrospectively rationalises its course underlies Brandom's project of reconciling us to contingency and alleviating us of the anxiety with which we regard it.

The judge at common law example serves an additional function in distinguishing Brandom's account from Darwall's account of practical agency. As seen in Section 3.4.2.1, the problem with adopting a derivative approach to metaethical constructivism is that the bare requirements of practical agency are incapable of yielding norms determinate enough to be action guiding as they are simply too thin to deliver anything so substantive as determinate norms of conduct, let alone moral obligations or entitlements. This is why Street instead offers a Humean account of constructivism according to which the content of our values is drawn from the contingent desires, projects, and dispositions of the agents who hold them. Indeed, if, as she notes, "the substantive content of an agent's normative reasons is a function of his or her particular, contingently given, evaluative starting points", then that content must be delivered in and through an investigation into what those evaluative starting points are and how they come to be ours.¹⁵⁸ Street's point is that we can understand why we value what we value only by looking at the kinds of beings we are with the kinds of histories we have.

It is precisely this non-derivative approach to the contents of our normative attitudes that the historical-recollective component of Brandom's account is designed to deliver since, as he puts it, "the determinateness of our very thoughts depends on incorporating natural, immediate contingency into our concepts as part of the process of determining their contents".¹⁵⁹ This means, as Samuel notes, that while the normative *authority* of practical intentionality may have its groundings for Brandom in the socially-

¹⁵⁸ Street, 2012, 41.

¹⁵⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 719.

mediated workings of what it is to be an agent, “the *content* of the practical standpoint is supplied from without [my emphasis]” since “what it is to be an agent is to be a particular, concrete agent, essentially embedded in an evolutionarily, socially, historically conditioned context”.¹⁶⁰ In the case of the judge at common law, while the precedents she inherits are a matter of sheer contingency, it is precisely what she *does* with that contingency – both by selecting *which* precedents she judges to be relevant in novel cases and in justifying *why* they are relevant – which gives substance to whatever determination she makes. This is precisely why retrospective recollective rational reconstruction consists, for Brandom, in “turning a past into a history”, in “giving contingent concrete actuality the normative form of necessity”.¹⁶¹

3.4.2.3 *Confession, Forgiveness, and Trust*

The final part of Brandom’s overarching argument details how the two components of his account – the social-recognitive institution of normative authority and the historical-recollective determination of conceptual content – are related. For while it may seem that the determination of conceptual content proceeds *prior* to the institution of its normative authority at present, there is an essential sense in which recollection *itself* exhibits a reciprocal structure. It is just that reciprocity which ensures that “the actual *application* of terms and the *institution* of conceptual norms governing such applications . . . interact (mediate one another) as aspects of one process” and hence that Brandom’s overarching account exhibits a one-stage metasemantic strategy.¹⁶²

The idea connecting the two components of Brandom’s account is that recollection, when successful, is itself a kind of recognition. But whereas social-recognitive relations are made reciprocal by extending recognition *horizontally* within a linguistic community, historical-recollective relations are made reciprocal by extending their recognitive gaze *vertically* over the course of history.¹⁶³ The result is a special, distinctively recollective form of reciprocal recognition that reaches back to our discursive ancestors and forwards to our discursive descendants.

¹⁶⁰ Samuel, 2022, 1473.

¹⁶¹ Brandom, 2019a, 17.

¹⁶² Brandom, 2019a, 611.

¹⁶³ For additional analysis of the relationship between the vertical and historical dimensions of Brandom’s account, see Bernstein, J. M. 2020. ‘Is Brandom a Positivist? Notes on Alienation, Trust, Confession, and Forgiveness’. In *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, edited by Gilles Bouché. New York, NY: Routledge.

What, then, does it mean to think of recollection as a kind of recognition? We can begin to make sense of this idea by noting that recollection, for whatever else it may be, is first and foremost a *speech act*. In order to retrospectively rationalise a course of experience, we must *do* something, viz. identify a sequence of concept uses that exhibits the norm governing their employment as expressively progressive.¹⁶⁴ The issue, however, is that precisely because recollection is a speech act, it is something we can attempt and yet fail to accomplish. Indeed, Brandom notes that the act of identifying an expressively progressive sequence of concept uses can be “hard” to achieve in much the same way that it can be hard to prove a mathematical theorem.¹⁶⁵ This means that we should expect at least some attempts at rational reconstruction to be unsuccessful, the conceptual content implicitly governing the concept’s uses all along not made fully explicit.

It is at this stage that the recognitive dimension of recollection can be brought to the fore. Brandom argues the process of ameliorating an instance of recollective failure requires pragmatic contributions from *both* the discursive ancestor who fails to make a concept’s implicit content fully explicit and the discursive descendent seeking to rectify that recollective failure. Just as in the case of recollection, both discursive participants must *do* something to rectify the initial failure. *What* they must do falls under the rubric of what Brandom calls *confession* and *forgiveness*. Like recollection itself, confession and forgiveness are speech acts, actions we must undertake to address a deficient recollection.¹⁶⁶ Confession and forgiveness denote each side of the recognitive dyad established in the recognitive-recollective encounter between discursive ancestor and discursive descendant, between the language user bequeathing their meaningful concept uses to posterity and the language user inheriting them, between assertion and assessment. Recollection that takes the recognitive form of reciprocal confession and forgiveness is what Brandom calls *trust*.¹⁶⁷

What, exactly, are confession and forgiveness then? And in what does their reciprocity consist? Confession is the normative attitude one adopts towards one’s *own* discursive activity in acknowledging that one has failed to recollectively identify an appropriate Ariadne’s thread of concept applications capable of making the concept’s implicit content explicit. *What* one confesses, Brandom contends, is “the contingency of [one’s] attitudes”, the fact that one’s “applications of concepts [also] respond to contingent features of subjective conceptions and attitudes, rather than just to the normative necessity determined by the content

¹⁶⁴ See Brandom, 2019a, 601.

¹⁶⁵ Brandom, 2019a, 599.

¹⁶⁶ Brandom, 2019a, 598.

¹⁶⁷ Brandom, 2019a, 737-8.

of the objective concepts”.¹⁶⁸ For despite our attempts to make the content implicit in our discursive practices explicit, it is impossible to completely exorcise from our socially-mediated dispositions to assent the contingencies, both actual and potential, animating them. To admit that such contingency features in one’s discursive practice is to confess that one’s attempt at giving contingency the normative form of necessity was unsuccessful, that “necessity [remains] infected with contingency”.¹⁶⁹

Forgiveness is the recognitive complement to confession. It denotes the attitude we must adopt towards the confessor’s admission of recollective failure if we are to repair it and make the still implicit conceptual content more explicit. To forgive one who confesses that they have failed to rationally reconstruct a course of experience is to take up the task in which they failed and to attempt to make a concept’s implicit content explicit in recollection. What we must *do* to forgive their failure to rationally reconstruct an instance of concept use is to “offer a rational reconstruction of a tradition to which the concept-application ... in question belongs” *of our own*, to identify an Ariadne’s thread that makes the conceptual tradition in question expressively progressive.¹⁷⁰ Forgiveness therefore consists in recollecting a course of experience in a recognitive context, in rationally reconstructing *another’s* concept applications as expressively progressive so that they become determinate for *oneself*. The key idea behind establishing such a recollectively recognitive relation between us and our discursive ancestors (and between us and our discursive descendants) is that to adopt a forgiving recognitive attitude, that is, to take up the discursive reins dropped by one’s discursive ancestor, is to *make their normative commitments one’s own*. This is why recollection, when successful, is essentially recognitive: because rationally reconstructing a course of experience is to give the contingencies that seep into our discursive *peers’* performances the normative form of necessity. Indeed, as Brandom puts it, “when recognition takes the ... form of recollection, it is *forgiveness*”.¹⁷¹ Bearing forgiving recognitive relations to our linguistic ancestors is in this respect to recognise that our norm-governed ways of going on still contain an element of contingency yet are no less normatively binding for it.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 592 and 610.

¹⁶⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 610.

¹⁷⁰ Brandom, 2019a, 601.

¹⁷¹ Brandom, 2019a, 19.

¹⁷² As with recollection writ large, this is not to say that we must consciously and explicitly set out to undertake a process of confession and forgiveness if we are to institute recollective recognitive relations. Rather, confession and forgiveness are, for Brandom, just the explicit philosophical articulations of the speech acts we implicitly undertake

Trust is what Brandom calls the structure of recollective relations instituted by reciprocal cognitive relations of confession and forgiveness. It is important to note, however, that trust is not the result of the cognitive relation that holds between a confessing discursive ancestor and a forgiving discursive descendent. Rather, trust denotes the recollective structure resulting from *reciprocated* confession and *reciprocated* forgiveness. For since forgiveness itself consists in the recollective reconstruction of a course of experience, should *that* attempted rationalisation fail to exhaustively reconstruct the content of the course of experience confessed, then the speech act of forgiveness is *itself* a recollective failure to be confessed, an failure which is in its turn an entreaty for forgiveness.

What sets trust apart as a form of cognitive recollection is that the form of reciprocity it establishes is distinctively *asynchronous*. This is because since the discursive ancestors whose confessions we set out to forgive may have long since passed away, the only discursive participants able to forgive us our own failure to forgive our discursive ancestors are our own discursive descendants. Trust expresses the hope that our own concept uses and attempts at recollection will in their turn be forgiven for their failures to make the contents of our terms fully explicit, that our concept applications will in their turn form an episode of a content determining, expressively progressive reconstruction. As Brandom puts it, in confession, one “expresses prospective trust in others to find ways of ... forging / finding a unity of referent behind the disparity of sense Such trust is an acknowledgment of dependence on others for recognition in the form of forgiveness”.¹⁷³ This means, as he continues, that in its entreaty for forgiveness, “trusting is both acknowledging the authority of those trusted to forgive and invoking their responsibility to do so”, a cognitive relationship which not only constitutes a community among contemporaries, but which does so in a temporally-extended sense.¹⁷⁴ Just as reciprocal recognition among contemporaneous agents initiates us into the space of reasons, reciprocal recognition in the trusting form of reciprocal confession and forgiveness ensures that the discursive norms we contingently inherit gain our assent and are hence genuinely binding over our conduct.

Recollective rational reconstruction, mediated through the cognitive relations of confession and forgiveness, is the mechanism Brandom develops to establish irreducibly *historical* cognitive relations

in the flux of everyday discursive practice. Just as the vocative lies implicit in every assertion, so do trust and forgiveness implicitly govern all conceptual determination. See Brandom, 2019a, 31 and 579.

¹⁷³ Brandom, 2019a, 621.

¹⁷⁴ Brandom, 2019a, 621.

capable of forging normatively binding relations between the discursive norms we contingently happen to inherit and the beliefs and judgements we formulate with them. In this way do those norms receive our socially and historically mediated endorsement. Understood as a historicised account of recognition, recollection is thus Brandom's response to genealogical anxiety and his solution to its most poignant formulation: the rule-following paradox. The upshot of his account is that genealogical anxiety is ultimately unwarranted because the contingency to which it is a response is in fact a *necessary* condition on our discursive practices having any determinate content at all. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that our linguistic ancestors *failed* to fully delimit the bounds of the space of reasons into which we are thrown that we must take up the task ourselves in forgiveness. By problematising which parts of our linguistic inheritance we are prepared to endorse and which we are prepared to reject, recollection, as John McDowell might put it, constitutes how we find out which system of discursive practices we've been acculturated into.¹⁷⁵

3.5 Recognition, Recollection, Genealogy

As we bring this chapter to a close it will be worthwhile to take stock of our progress and reflect on how this reconstruction of Brandom's account fits into my overarching argument about the status of genealogical anxiety. That duly demands assessing how well Brandom responds to the problem raised by the contingency of our discursive practices and delineating the issues that remain unaddressed.

Let's begin by briefly recapping the problem to which Brandom offers a solution. The problem that genealogical inquiry lays bare, poignantly articulated in the rule-following paradox, is the acute threat of nihilism about norms. For if, as seen in Section 1.4.3, our dispositions to go on as we do are but a function of the causally explicable, historically contingent processes in which we find ourselves enmeshed, then there simply are and can be no determinate normative standards that would settle the question of whether a performance is correct or incorrect. We do not act according to reasons; we just act. The unease experienced upon realising the danger that the rule-following paradox poses to our normative lives is the most acute formulation of genealogical anxiety, the philosophical dilemma at the heart of this thesis.

Having identified the problem underlying existing responses to the rule-following paradox as their implicit assumption of a two-stage metasemantic strategy, the very assumption on which the rule-following

¹⁷⁵ See McDowell, 1996, 91-92 and 125-6.

paradox itself depends, I then argued that Brandom aims to provide an integrated account of the binding authority of norms and of conceptual content. That account is, I contend, able to answer the rule-following paradox precisely *because* the contingency of our discursive practices is what gives them their determinacy. The argument Brandom presents has two interrelated components: a social-recognitive account of the institution of normative authority and a historical-recollective account of the determination of conceptual content. The former establishes the distance between assertion and assessment required for normativity on the basis of reciprocal recognitive relations obtaining between the members of a linguistic community. The latter identifies the mechanism – viz. the process of integrating the beliefs and judgements of our linguistic ancestors into an expressively progressive sequence – by which we come to make the conceptual traditions we happen to inherit our own and, in so doing, give contingency the normative form of necessity. Both components of Brandom’s account are related to one another in such a way as to avoid the pitfalls of two-stage metasemantic strategies since each characterises one side of a single process of language use, the process by which, as McDowell puts it, “our eyes are opened to the very existence of ... the space of reasons”.¹⁷⁶

The account retailed in *A Spirit of Trust* is, I think, the most promising proposal for overcoming genealogical anxiety and for answering the question of how genuinely binding rational norms are possible in the literature. For rather than arguing that our unease in the face of contingency is simply unwarranted, Brandom contends that a workable notion of semantic content *demand*s that we embrace the contingency of the discursive practices into which we are thrown lest they collapse into indeterminacy, if, that is, they are to have any content at all. It is in this respect that we ought not be genealogically anxious.

¹⁷⁶ McDowell, 1996, 82.

4 Towards a Critical Pragmatics

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past.

– Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*¹

4.1 Why Do We Go in for Two-Stage Metasemantic Strategies?

Robert Brandom's intertwined account of the institution of normative authority and the determination of conceptual content is in my view the most philosophically promising response to genealogical anxiety and to the question of how genuinely binding rational norms are possible. Faced with the challenge of charting a course between the Scylla of regulism and the Charybdis of regularism, Brandom contends that we can think of normative government – the pillar on which the very intelligibility of meaning rests – as the transformation of contingent fact into rational necessity, a process in which the norms always already implicitly governing our discursive practices are made ever more explicit. That transformation is in turn a product of both the social relations through which agents hold each other accountable for the content of their linguistic performances and the historical relations in terms of which that content is determined and expressed. This means that although linguistic activity does indeed involve ineliminable contingency, it is precisely the incorporation of that contingency into a retrospectively identified tradition that guarantees the contentfulness of the norms to which we take ourselves to be subject. The upshot of this picture is that contingency turns out to be a *condition* on the possibility of meaning *tout court*, the genealogical anxiety we

¹ Marx, Karl. 2000b. 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte'. In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 329.

experience in the face of it the result of erroneously attempting to fulfil the success conditions appropriate to formal, rather than natural, languages. Whereas two-stage metasemantic strategies strive to *eliminate* the pressure that contingency exerts on the normativity of our discursive practices, Brandom argues that we become reconciled to contingency upon appreciating the essential role it plays in constituting that very normativity.

Yet despite its promise, there is a question we may find ourselves asking that threatens to cut the feet out from under Brandom's project. For precisely because the course between Scylla and Charybdis becomes available upon eschewing a two-stage metasemantic strategy, it begs the following question: if two-stage metasemantic strategies are so plainly implausible, why do we find them at all viable in the first place? In what does their allure consist? Where do we err so dramatically as to view the history of our own discursive practices as a source of anxiety?²

To ask these questions is to initiate a shift of philosophical posture. For while we have so far participated in a research programme that seeks to *resolve* genealogical anxiety by revealing it to depend on some heretofore unidentified error, the question now is to understand why it emerges *as a problem to be resolved* in the first place.³ To take up the former project is to approach the issue *analytically*; to take up the latter is to approach it *diagnostically*.⁴ Wilfrid Sellars articulates the significance of the distinction as follows:

There are two obvious ways in which a philosopher can attack a theory which he believes to be mistaken. He can seek to reduce it to absurdity by developing its implications and showing them to be either mutually inconsistent or incompatible with the incontrovertible. Or he can attempt to trace the error back to its roots, and show why those who defend it have been led to speak as they do. Of these two methods, it is clear that only the latter is capable of definitive results. A mistaken theory can be compared to a symptom of a disease. By the use of inadequate medicaments one can often 'cure' the symptoms while leaving the disease untouched. And by exposing the absurdity of a theory, one can often prevent philosophers from espousing it, at least overtly, though only too often they react to a proof that their theory conflicts with 'obvious common sense' by piling a Pelion of paradox on the original Ossa. Even should the theory be abandoned, at least as an overt article of faith,

² Cf. the approach to philosophy of language adopted by Simon Blackburn in Blackburn, Simon. 2017b.

'Pragmatism: All or Some or All and Some?' In *The Practical Turn: Pragmatism in Britain in the Long Twentieth Century*, edited by Cheryl Misak and Huw Price. Oxford, UK: The British Academy.

³ As Michel Foucault might have put it, the goal is not to find a "solution" to genealogical anxiety, but to understand why it strikes us as a "problématique[...]" at all. Foucault, Michel. 1984b. 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress'. In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 343.

⁴ Nietzsche, taking this demand literally, claims that the project of determining "the *value* of all previous valuations" requires "the support of physiologists and doctors" (*GM* I:17).

the root confusion is left untouched by this method, and, like many a versatile disease, finds other ways of making its presence felt.⁵

It is only by adopting such a diagnostic posture to genealogical anxiety that we can excise the fundamental confusion that leads us to consider the history of our own discursive practice with anxiety.⁶ For even if Brandom's account is the most promising response to genealogical anxiety available, the issue, as Wittgenstein himself notes, is that "to convince someone of what is true, it is not enough to state the truth; one must find the *way* from error to truth".⁷ Indeed, unless we address what György Lukács calls "the 'critical' question", we shall continue, like "that legendary 'critic' in India who was confronted with the ancient story according to which the world rests upon an elephant", to conjure "miraculous animal[s]" in support of a theoretical edifice whose flaw lies in the very formulation of the problem to which it is a response.⁸

Having adopted an analytic posture towards genealogical anxiety and the possibility of authoritatively binding norms thus far, arriving at the fulcrum of my thesis here means that it becomes incumbent upon us to consider why we adopted it in the first place, what forms of philosophical theorising it makes possible, and what forms it forecloses. As we pass over the apex of my argument and the lever on which we stand begins to pitch, adopting the diagnostic posture required to answer such questions is what

⁵ Sellars, Wilfrid. 1952. 'Particulars'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 13 (2): 184. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2103871>.

⁶ As Colin Koopman notes, we often find ourselves at a loss in such circumstances because the way a philosophical problem has been *posed* restricts us to "possible solutions [that] carry us along paths of thought that leave us unable to deal with the condition that we impose on ourselves". Koopman, Colin. 2013. *Genealogy as Critique: Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. 134-5. Gilles Deleuze calls problems of this kind "false problems", the very idea of which "implies that we have to struggle not against simple mistakes . . . , but against something more profound: an illusion that carries us along, or in which we are immersed, inseparable from our condition". Deleuze, Gilles. 1988. *Bergsonism*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. New York, NY: Zone Books. 20. See also Bergson, Henri. 1946. *The Creative Mind*. Translated by Mabelle L. Andison. New York, NY: Philosophical Library 57-8 and Brady, John C. 2022. 'Bergson on Problems'. *Epoché*, June 2022. <https://epochemagazine.org/53/bergson-on-problems/>.

⁷ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 2018. 'Remarks on Frazer's *The Golden Bough*'. In *The Mythology in Our Language: Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, edited by Stephan Palmié and Giovanni da Col, translated by Stephan Palmié. Chicago, IL: HAU Books. §1.

⁸ Lukács, György. 1971. 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat'. In *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 110.

shall enable us, to borrow Stanley Cavell's phrase, to return to genealogical anxiety's "natural environment": the concrete political circumstances in which we encounter other ways of thinking, acting, and living.⁹

The complication, however, is that adopting a diagnostic posture towards genealogical anxiety demands that we adapt not just the objective of our inquiry, but also our understanding of what it means to conduct meaningful philosophical inquiry at all. As John McDowell sees it, we must decline to

answer philosophical questions of the sort ... here singled out: "How possible?" questions whose felt urgency derives from a frame of mind that, if explicitly thought through, would yield materials for an argument that what the questions are asked about is impossible. Evidently it can seem sensible to embark on such a project only if one does not quite understand the predicament that seems to motivate it. If the frame of mind is left in place, one cannot show how whatever it is that one is asking about is possible; if the frame of mind is dislodged, the "How possible?" question no longer has the point it seemed to have. Either way, there is no prospect of answering the question as it was putatively meant.¹⁰

In the present context, this means that while we previously sought to answer the question 'How are genuinely binding rational norms possible given the contingency of our discursive practices?', the prospect of a negative answer fuelling our genealogical anxiety, our task is now to *dissolve* the urgency of the question itself by freeing ourselves from the 'frame of mind' from which it descends. This is precisely why McDowell (and, indeed, Wittgenstein himself) claims that the rule-following paradox is not to be responded to directly. Instead, we must examine "why we are inclined to fall into the peculiar [frame of mind] ... that makes such questions look pressing" and thereby "lay bare how uncompulsory it is to think in that way".¹¹ The trick will thus be to show, as Cora Diamond puts it, that "there was not anything at all that we were imagining" when we thought we were thinking about genealogical anxiety.¹²

From where, then, ought we embark on the project of dissolving the force of genealogical anxiety? The first thing to note is that adopting a diagnostic posture to the issue demands that we refrain from

⁹ Cavell, Stanley. 2015. 'Must We Mean What We Say?' In *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 38. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316286616>.

¹⁰ McDowell, John. 1996. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. xxiii-xxiv.

¹¹ McDowell, John. 1992. 'Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 17: 47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1992.tb00141.x>. See also McDowell, 1996, 86 and McDowell, John. 2013. 'How Not to Read *Philosophical Investigations*: Brandom's Wittgenstein'. In *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹² Diamond, Cora. 1989. 'Rules: Looking in the Right Place'. In *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars: Essays in Honour of Rush Rhees (1905-89)*, edited by D. Z. Phillips and Peter Winch. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-11197-8>.

continuing to pose the kinds of normative questions which typically motivate discussions of genealogical inquiry in the literature, questions such as whether we *ought* to be genealogically anxious or whether we *ought* to revise our beliefs upon discovering their causal aetiologies.¹³ Brandom's account is (at least in part) an extended meditation of just this kind, his conclusion a qualified negative. Yet if we are to have any hope of identifying and ameliorating the 'frame of mind' from which genealogical anxiety arises, then we must reorient our attention towards its conditions of possibility, the circumstances – philosophical and, I contend, material – in whose terms genealogical anxiety appears as an intelligible response to contingency.¹⁴ The objective will thus be to articulate the conditions under which, as Michel Foucault puts it, "the different solutions to a problem have been constructed; but also how these different solutions result from a specific form of problematisation" which makes them possible.¹⁵ Indeed, just as Marx notes that the demand for a people "to give up the illusions about their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion", so must we recognise that the demand to give up our anxiety is a demand to give up a condition that requires it.¹⁶ Realigning the questions towards which our investigation is oriented by exiting the armchair serves to inaugurate the second half of my overarching argument and is the fulcrum on which this thesis hinges.

4.2 Ideology and Semantics

Presenting a positive account of genealogical anxiety's conditions of possibility requires that I incur a sizeable argumentative debt. Stated explicitly at this point in my argument, the claim towards which I have

¹³ Cf. Srinivasan, Amia. 2015. 'The Archimedean Urge'. *Philosophical Perspectives* 29 (1): 327.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/phpe.12068>; Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2023a. 'Should We Be Genealogically Anxious?: From Anxiety to Epistemic Agency and Critical Resistance'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 47: 103–33.

<https://doi.org/10.5840/msp2023103142>; and White, Roger. 2010. 'You Just Believe That Because...' *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (1): 573–615. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2010.00204.x>.

¹⁴ Brandom would of course be perfectly entitled to claim that although taking a step back from this normativised language game might be important, it is simply not part of what he sets out to accomplish. As we shall see in Section 4.3, however, such a strategy is unavailable both to Brandom specifically – because he explicitly acknowledges the political import of his account – and to the pragmatist project in general – because what we *do* in discursive activity is always already bound up in concrete social and political formations.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. 1984e. 'Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations'. In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 389. See also Foucault, Michel. 1984b. 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress'. In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 343.

¹⁶ Marx, Karl. 2000c. 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction'. In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 72.

been working shall appear at best thought-provoking if unsubstantiated and at worst plainly implausible. By the end of this chapter, I hope, if not to have repaid the debt in full, to have at least set out a viable repayment plan. With any luck, what might have seemed unsubstantiated to implausible to start with will begin to look something like the truth.

The principal claim I shall defend over the remainder of this thesis is that the ‘frame of mind’ from which two-stage metasemantic strategies appear plausible – and hence from which the strongest formulation of genealogical anxiety arises – is a kind of ideological distortion that emerges under the conditions of systematic inequality characteristic of oppression. This is not to say that all forms of genealogical anxiety implicitly assume a two-stage metasemantic strategy, i.e., that the reason why we experience genealogically anxiety is because we have committed ourselves, consciously or not, to a two-stage metasemantic strategy. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 1, genealogical anxiety can be experienced in ways other than as anxiety towards the contingency of meaning and is thus a phenomenon more capacious than metasemantic analysis alone can capture. Nor is it to say that if we assume a two-stage metasemantic strategy, then we must be under the spell of some ideological distortion. There are any number of reasons, legitimate and mistaken, for why we might do so. Instead, my claim is that 1) assuming a two-stage metasemantic strategy *does* lead to a particularly intractable, particularly acute form of genealogical anxiety (the rule-following paradox), one all the more troubling for how widespread two-stage metasemantic strategies are; and that 2) the ideological conditions typical of oppressive social systems create a discursive environment in which we are wont to find two-stage metasemantic strategies plausible.¹⁷ Having established 1) in Section 3.3, I shall now turn my attention towards establishing 2).

While the work of motivating this contention will occupy my discussion for the remainder of this chapter, the basic idea is, I think, comparatively intuitive. Indeed, it is nothing but a consequence of the one-stage metasemantic strategy on which Brandom’s response to the rule-following paradox depends. The idea is that if, as Brandom insists, our discursive practices are rendered intelligible in and through their

¹⁷ Another way we might articulate this claim is that while I do endorse the conditional ‘if we assume a two-stage metasemantic strategy, then genealogical anxiety emerges’, I do not endorse the biconditional ‘genealogical anxiety emerges if and only if we assume a two-stage metasemantic strategy’. I think the conditional ‘if genealogical anxiety emerges, then we (must have) assume(d) a two-stage metasemantic strategy’ is false because, as noted, there are multiple forms of genealogical anxiety for which there is no obvious reason why we would have to assume any particular metasemantic approach. In its turn, the appeal to ideology is intended to explain why we might find ourselves assuming a two-stage metasemantic strategy, the antecedent of the conditional I do endorse, despite the problems to which it leads.

enactment in a complex web of social and historical relations, then the *structure* of that web – concretely manifested and objectified in the institutions and social systems which constitute the social world – will come to bear on the authority and content of our discursive practices. Uncovering and articulating that structure is thus of vital importance to an understanding of both normative authority and conceptual content, two interrelated issues typically thought of as several degrees removed from the rough and tumble of ground-level social interaction. The crux of my claim is that since, as a matter of fact, the constellations of social and historical relations in which we are situated are shaped, organised, and regulated by the inequalities, marginalisations, and forms of domination characteristic of multiple intersecting axes of oppression, then the norms governing our discursive practices exhibit the imprints of those pathologies from the ground up. A central implication of my argument is thus that how society is structured not only has deep epistemological implications (as has been extensively theorised), but that how it is structured also has deep *semantic* implications.¹⁸ This means that while it is now generally accepted that oppression structures what we *believe*, I also endorse the more radical claim that oppression also structures, at both the point of uptake and the point of articulation, what we can *assert*.

4.2.1 Ideology as False Consciousness

The thread which ties the structure of the social world to the misperceived viability of two-stage metasemantic strategies, and hence to our experience of genealogical anxiety, is *ideology*. While the term has received a multitude of different treatments, the sense relevant for our purposes is denoted by what Raymond Geuss calls “ideology in the pejorative sense”.¹⁹ On this picture, “the term ‘ideology’ is used ...

¹⁸ The literature on the epistemological consequences of oppression is vast. For an overview of some of its more influential contributions, see Hartsock, Nancy. 2004. ‘The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism’. In *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, edited by Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka. Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/0-306-48017-4_15; Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; and Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York, NY: Grove Press. For an introduction to the comparatively smaller literature of the semantic implications of oppression, see Haslanger, Sally. 2012. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

¹⁹ Geuss, Raymond. 1981. *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 12-22. Alongside ideology in the pejorative sense, Geuss distinguishes two more ways in which the term ‘ideology’ is typically used that he calls ideology in the descriptive sense and ideology in the positive sense. See Geuss, 1981, 4-12 and 22-6 respectively. As an indication of the breadth of meanings associated with the term, Terry Eagleton identifies no less than 16 distinct senses of ideology. See Eagleton, Terry. 1991. *Ideology: An Introduction*. London, UK: Verso. 1-2.

to criticise a form of consciousness because it incorporates beliefs which are false, or because it functions in a reprehensible way, or because it has a tainted origin".²⁰ As I shall argue, an ideology is a constellation of relatively coherent beliefs which function to maintain the smooth operation of a social system by distorting or obscuring the social situation of those who inhabit it. The basic idea is that in order to stabilise and reinforce forms of social organisation which the agents subject to them would otherwise refuse to accept, social structures give rise to forms of thought which act to insure them against resistance by obscuring their true nature, the harms they produce, and the causes of those harms. To claim that a set of beliefs is ideological is thus a means of critiquing or condemning it either for its falsity or for its contribution to sustaining the injustices of the social system from which it emerges. Using the term pejoratively is hence to engage in *ideology critique*.

There are two issues that any theory of ideology must explain. The first is what the 16th Century essayist Étienne de La Boétie calls the problem of "voluntary servitude", the question of

how it happens that so many men [*sic*], so many villages, so many cities, so many nations, sometimes suffer under a single tyrant who has no other power than the power they give him; who is able to harm them only to the extent to which they have the willingness to bear with him; who could do them absolutely no injury unless they preferred to put up with him rather than contradict him. Surely a striking situation! Yet it is so common that one must grieve the more and wonder the less at the spectacle of a million men serving in wretchedness, their necks under the yoke, not constrained by a greater multitude than they, but simply, it would seem, delighted and charmed by the name of one man alone whose power they need not fear, for he is evidently the one person whose qualities they cannot admire because of his inhumanity and brutality toward them.²¹

For La Boétie, the purpose of an account of ideology is to address why agents willingly submit to forms of social organisation antithetical to their interests or well-being. Indeed, as Wilhelm Reich put it almost four hundred years later, the puzzle is "not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry *don't* steal and why the majority of those who are exploited *don't* strike".²² On this picture, the issue at stake is *epistemological*: burdened with a

²⁰ Geuss, 1981, 21.

²¹ La Boétie, Étienne de. 1975. *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*. Translated by Harry Kurz. New York, NY: Free Life Editions. 42.

²² Reich, Wilhelm. 1970. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. Edited by Mary Higgins and Chester M. Raphael. Translated by Vincent R. Carfagno. New York, NY: Noonday Press. 19.

defective understanding of both the mode of social organisation in which we find ourselves and our own interests, the purpose of an account of ideology is to expose and explain the source of those defects.

The second issue that a viable account of ideology must explain is how, as Louis Althusser puts it, “ideology brings off the feat of making things and people ‘go all by themselves’”.²³ How, in other words, does ideology ensure the smooth operation of a social system which, left to its own devices, would be liable to collapse? This means that whereas the issue animating La Boétie’s and Reich’s concern is epistemic, the problem for Althusser is fundamentally *functional*. For rather than focussing on our mistaken representations, the question here is how oppressive social systems perpetuate and reproduce themselves over time independently of – and frequently in spite of – the wishes and intentions of the agents who inhabit it. Indeed, while the defining feature of oppressive social systems is their use of violent coercion to maintain their domination at the *frontier* of their power, equally remarkable is how they manufacture consent to their regime in order to forego having to resort to more transparently objectionable forms of compulsion at all. This means that as well as explaining how the oppressed are habituated to their servitude, an account of ideology must also be able to explain how objectionable social systems secure broad *intra*class cohesion. Taken together, a viable account of ideology must thus explain both how a social system, as a normal result of its structure, produces defective epistemic structures and how those defective epistemic structures function to support its continued operation.

Although not the first to engage with these questions, it is Marx who presents the most fully realised theory of ideology in response to them. Marx’s basic idea, articulated by Theodor Adorno, is that ideology operates by subjecting social agents to “objectively necessary and simultaneously false consciousness”.²⁴ Ideology is objectively necessary because it serves to support forms of social organisation which fail to secure the free assent of the agents who inhabit them and are hence unstable in the face of resistance. Ideology is simultaneously false consciousness because, as Friedrich Engels puts it, although “ideology is a process accomplished by the ... thinker consciously”, it is nevertheless the case that “the real motive forces

²³ Althusser, Louis. 2014. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. London, UK: Verso. 93. See also Poulantzas, Nicos. 1969. ‘The Problem of the Capitalist State’. *New Left Review* 1 (58): 67–78.

²⁴ Adorno, Theodor. 1972. ‘Beitrag zur Ideologie’. In *Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann. Vol. 8, Soziologische Schriften I. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag. 465. My translation of “[Ideologie ist] objektiv notwendiges und zugleich falsches Bewußtsein”.

impelling him [*sic*] are unknown to him Hence he imagines false or seeming motive forces”.²⁵ Taken together, the image that presents itself is of ideology as a kind of *illusion*, a veil placed over the eyes which hinders the accurate perception of a social structure that one has an overriding interest in resisting and would otherwise refuse to accept. For those who subscribe to a conception of ideology as false consciousness, this means that ideology *critique* takes on the form of an unmasking project insofar as it aims to eliminate ideological illusion and reveal the truth it obscures, a truth which shall, so the story goes, set us free. For Marx, such a critique duly consists in righting the perception of those whose “circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*” (GI 180) or, alternatively, in identifying how an age’s “ruling ideas” – what he calls “the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas” (GI 192) – support the ruling class’s material interests against those of the dominated. For those who understand ideology as false consciousness, the key point is that ideological obfuscation and the role it plays in maintaining oppressive social relations is to be remedied by, as the now meaningless slogan has it, speaking truth to power.²⁶

4.2.2 Semantic Fetishism

Construed as false consciousness, ideology is first and foremost a matter of mistaken *belief*. There is, however, an ideological belief whose significance stands above the rest, the essential relevance of ideology to the analysis of genealogical anxiety becoming apparent upon cashing out its implications.

At their most potent, “ideas function ideologically”, Iris Marion Young argues, “when they represent the institutional context in which they arise as natural or necessary”.²⁷ This is because representing

²⁵ Engels, Friedrich. 1978. ‘Letters on Historical Materialism: To Franz Mehring’. In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company. 766.

²⁶ It is important to note that this conception of ideology – and the account of ideology critique that follows from it – encounters serious problems. For one, the fact that it putatively serves to maintain objectionable social circumstances means that it produces its own conditions of possibility. Distinguishing between instances of ‘true’ and ‘false’ consciousness thus becomes impossible because the relation between ideology and the social system from which it arises is no longer representational but generative. I introduce the account here simply to set the stage for the discussion in Section 4.2.2. For an overview of the problems facing the account of ideology as false consciousness, see Ratcliffe, Julian. 2018. ‘Beyond Ideology: Marx, Critique, and the Production of Social Reality’. MPhilStud Thesis. Department of Philosophy, King’s College London. Cf. Jaeggi, Rahel. 2009. ‘Rethinking Ideology’. In *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, edited by Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230234994_4.

²⁷ Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 74. Alasia Nuti argues that ideology governs the dynamics between what she calls “environmental” and “rules based” structures. Environmental structures, on the one hand, “include all those physical imprints on our surrounding world

an institutional context as natural or necessary serves to maintain its hegemony by construing resistance to it as futile *in advance*, the social structures constituting it given, fixed, and unchangeable. Indeed, if the purpose of false consciousness is to reinforce an otherwise unstable social system, the most effective strategy for doing so is to insist that there is no alternative, that how things are is the only way they can be, the pursuit of alternatives a fool's errand. By thus expelling the object of potential resistance from the realm of possible political contestation, the issue at stake does not even emerge as a problem demanding resolution, let alone as one which demands redress. Indeed, this is precisely why the genealogical revelation of contingency, the revelation that things *can* in fact be otherwise, is so powerful a critique. The suggestion that a given mode of social organisation cannot be otherwise, that it is an inescapable feature of the social world, is for this reason the ideological distortion *par excellence*.²⁸

Centring the ideological (mis)representation of the social world's modal status means, however, that we must reappraise the normative structure of ideology as false consciousness. For although such an instance of ideology may manifest as a false *belief*, it *functions* as an element of our background frameworks by delineating the structure and extent of the field of possible discursive agency in such a way as to render certain forms of political contestation unintelligible.

that result from many persons' deeds and decisions over time" which "we do not encounter ... as the outcome of 'past praxis' but as mere features of our environment that we have to deal with" (i.e., the urban environment, environmental pollutants, etc.). They are, as she puts it, "practico-inert". On the other hand, rules-based structures "consist of both formal and informal rules that mould the ways persons interact" (i.e., workplace hierarchies, dress codes, etc.). The ideological issue this raises is that which institutional systems we classify as environmental and which as rules based is itself a political issue since encountering a system one way or the other "profoundly affect[s] persons' lives by *constraining* and *enabling* their present and future possibilities". Nuti, Alasia. 2019. *Injustice and the Reproduction of History: Structural Inequalities, Gender and Redress*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 33. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108325592>.

²⁸ For analyses of ideology which centre its naturalising, decontestatory effects, see Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books. 16-7; Tiisala, Tuomo. 2017. 'Overcoming "The Present Limits of the Necessary": Foucault's Conception of a Critique'. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 55 (S1): 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12224>; Säynäjoki, Sakari, and Tuomo Tiisala. 2023. 'Revisable A Priori as a Political Problem: Critique of Constitution in Critical Theory'. *Journal of Social and Political Philosophy* 2 (2): 142-3. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jspp.2023.0054>; Bremner, Sabina Vaccarino, and Chloé De Canson. 2025. 'Ideology as Relativised A Priori: On the Mind's Relation to the Social World'. *Political Philosophy* 2 (1). <https://doi.org/10.16995/pp.16337>; Celikates, Robin. 2006. 'From Critical Social Theory to a Social Theory of Critique: On the Critique of Ideology after the Pragmatic Turn'. *Constellations* 13 (1): 21-40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1351-0487.2006.00438.x>; Searle, John R. 1996. *The Construction of Social Reality*. London, UK: Penguin Books. 132; Mills, Charles W. 1998. 'Alternative Epistemologies?'. In *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 34. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501702952>; Jameson, Fredric. 1994. *The Seeds of Time*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. xii; Stanley, Jason. 2015. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 157; Elster, Jon. 1983. *Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139171694>; and Lukács, 1971, 110.

This has two primary effects. On the one hand, as above, such ideological misrepresentation delimits what counts as intelligible discursive activity in advance. This has the effect of excluding certain forms of resistance from political consideration not as a result of overt repression, but because they are simply unintelligible as forms of political agency. Yet on the other hand, determining the field of intelligible political action establishes the very conceptual architecture through which we navigate the social world. Indeed, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, an ideology “is given less by the explicit articulation of one’s experience of the social world, but by the practically-manifested sense of one’s place in the social order, the internally imposed limits of what one can allow oneself, the inclination to take the world as it is”.²⁹ This is why, as he continues, “the categories which inform the perception of the social world are the stakes *par excellence* in the social struggle since it is through them that the objective social relations reproduce themselves in the minds of those populating the social landscape and, thereby, reproduce those relations objectively”.³⁰

This is precisely the idea that forms the backbone of Marx’s critique of the commodity form, the fetishisation of which constitutes the institutional hermeneutic which renders social reality under capitalism intelligible.³¹ As Marx famously articulates it,

A commodity is ... a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. ... There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things (C 473).

As he continues, the result of this fetishisation is that

Man’s reflections on the forms of social life ... take a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development. He begins, *post festum*, with the results of the process of development ready to hand before him. The characters that stamp products as commodities, and whose establishment is a necessary preliminary to the circulation of commodities, have already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life, before man seeks to decipher, not their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but their meaning (C 476).

²⁹ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991b. ‘Social Space and the Genesis of “Classes”’. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John B. Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 235.

³⁰ Bourdieu, 1991b, 236.

³¹ This point was brought to my awareness by an anonymous reviewer, to whom I am very grateful.

While predicated on a false belief, viz. that social relations do not have a historical character, Marx's point is that it is through the given, ossified categories of the commodity form – an alien power animating the worker's social existence – that it becomes possible to conceptualise the structure of social relations under capitalism.³² In this way, ideological *beliefs* condition the *meanings* it is intelligible to institute and determine, those meanings in turn conditioning the possibilities of belief. Indeed, just as the distinction between debunking and problematising genealogies that we examined in Section 2.5 trades on a distinction between the critiques they offer of our doxastic landscapes and our background frameworks, so too does the distinction between ideology as false consciousness and what we might call *ideology as fetishisation* trade on a distinction between a critique which denounces our beliefs as false and one which makes visible the process by which a space for political consciousness, true or false, can be constituted.

Ideology as fetishisation, the ideological misrepresentation of the modal status of the social systems in which we are embedded, is the hitch pin that connects genealogical anxiety to the explanatory structure of two-stage metasemantic strategies. This is because if we are to even consider a two-stage metasemantic strategy an intelligible model of natural language, we must first adopt a 'frame of mind' according to which distinguishing the process of concept use from the process of conceptual determination is not just possible but required. It is, I contend, just this possibility that representing the social world as natural or necessary, as given, fixed, and unalterable, makes available to us. For in characterising an institutional context as given, the essentially dynamic social-recognitive and historical-recollective processes through which our discursive practices are both endowed with normative authority and rendered determinately contentful are similarly construed as given, the meanings thus determined fixed prior to discursive activity and beyond the reach of our collective agency. Yet this is precisely the logical form that any candidate for what Wittgenstein calls non-normative "bedrock" (*PI* §217) must assume if it is to function as the grounds of discursive practice. Indeed, it is by construing the actual flux of social and historical relations in which we are entangled as given that the two-stage metasemantic strategy's ambition to determine the meanings of our terms once and for all becomes a live option. For if the social-historical process through which our meanings are determined is in some sense not up to us, an objective "relation between things" rather than "a definite social relation between men", we can be, as Wittgenstein puts it, "contented" that whatever interpretation we have is final,

³² For the fullest analysis of the ideological constitution of social reality in the Marxist tradition, see Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. London, UK: Lawrence and Wishart.

the urge to find “yet another standing behind it” (*PI* §201) defused. By halting the metalinguistic regress before it even begins, the ideological distortions typical of the oppressive social systems which constitute the social world duly enable the initial semantic stage of two-stage metasemantic strategies to get off the ground.

Crucially, the connection between ideology as fetishisation and genealogical anxiety consists in the fact that the job of ideology is not, as Sally Haslanger puts it, just to obscure “what’s in our heads”, but also to “actively mask[...] what’s semantically going on”.³³ For in attributing the semantic conditions of discursive normativity to forces beyond our control, two-stage metasemantic strategies impute to our language a fetishistic character just as the commodity form facilitates conceptual access to the social world disclosed by capitalism. Two-stage metasemantic strategies are in this sense the semantic expressions of underlying social pathologies that pervade and structure the relations through which discursive normativity is rendered determinate. Yet because representing the basis of discursive practice as natural or necessary is ultimately an ideological *illusion*, the groundings of two-stage metasemantic strategies are perpetually vulnerable to exposure. Indeed, in relinquishing agency over the conditions of discursive normativity to fetishistically stabilise the semantic stage, we *ipso facto* institute the conditions of possibility for genealogical anxiety since the very idea of founding discursive practice on immovable linguistic bedrock is perpetually susceptible to the genealogical challenge that it is but the product of arbitrary forces. Ideology as fetishisation thereby establishes an expectation of immutability that the reality of contingency cannot but undercut, the discrepancy between them the very tension in which genealogical anxiety consists. That we are led awry by the fetishisation of the social and historical conditions of meaning is precisely why Wittgenstein claims that “language can only say those things that we can also imagine otherwise” (*PR_W* V:54).

If, however, genealogical anxiety consists in the recognition of contingency where before we only found necessity, this means that genealogical anxiety can also be thought of as the frightened first apprehension of the true extent of our collective agency and what Seyla Benhabib calls the “glimmers of

³³ Haslanger, Sally. 2005. ‘What Are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds’. *Hypatia* 20 (4): 12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00533.x>. Wittgenstein himself lays the groundwork for this thought in noting that “language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it”. Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1961. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London, UK: Routledge. 4.002. Indeed, as Huw Price puts it, “language needn’t wear its logical form on its face”. Price, Huw. 2013. *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 28n11.

another life” it reveals.³⁴ Indeed, as the light of nascent possibility floods through the cracks of a social world ossified, as Lukács puts it, into “the only possible world, the only conceptually accessible, comprehensible world vouchsafed to us humans”, genealogical anxiety serves, as Catarina Dutilh Novaes argues, as “the initial stage in the difficult process of dismantling ... oppressive epistemic systems”.³⁵

Should we accept this analysis, genealogical anxiety can be seen to be a downstream effect of the ideological formations distorting the metasemantic picture with which we understand our own discursive practice. Since those ideological formations themselves arise as a result of the normal operation of oppressive social systems, this means that genealogical anxiety is ultimately a result of the pathologies lacing the structure of society. Indeed, as Adorno puts it, “all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts ... are moments of the reality that requires their formation”.³⁶ If we are to grapple with the anxiety with which we regard the contingency of our discursive practices, we must hence correct the semantic picture on which such anxiety depends by ameliorating the social pathologies from which it emerges.³⁷

4.3 Whose Forms of Life?

Construing normative authority as essentially social and conceptual content as essentially historical means that if we wish to understand the discursive norms to which *we*, in *our* particular social landscape and at *our* particular point in history, are subject, then we must examine the *actually obtaining* social and historical structures in which we find ourselves. As Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) and Mark Lance correctly note,

performing an utterance does not magically transform the normative status of others in the community ...; rather, it is through concrete communicative interactions that involve holding one another responsible, granting entitlements to one another, and making demands upon one another that our speech acts strive to effect their normative functions. Normative statuses are not abstract entities that shift around in some kind of ideal space – on some great, abstractly characterisable Platonic scoreboard, as it were. To think of

³⁴ Benhabib, Seyla. 1986. *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 181.

³⁵ Lukács, 1971, 110 and Dutilh Novaes, 2023a, 106.

³⁶ Adorno, Theodor W. 1973. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E. B. Ashton. London, UK: Routledge. 11.

³⁷ For an excellent treatment of social pathology as a category of analysis in critical theory, see Neuhouser, Frederick. 2022. *Diagnosing Social Pathology: Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Durkheim*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009235020>.

language in this way would undercut the point of putting pragmatics front and centre, which requires recognising language as a concrete normative phenomenon, grasped in the first instance as a body of skilful interactions among speakers.³⁸

This means, as Nancy Bauer argues, that because

words must do things in order to mean things in any robust sense of *mean*, and because in doing things with our words we stake ourselves in the world and position ourselves with respect to other people, no philosophy of language ... can ignore the extent to which linguistic competence is, broadly speaking, an *ethical* matter.³⁹

The upshot of Kukla and Lance's and Bauer's contention is that if we are to conduct a substantive analysis of discursive normativity, we must turn our attention to the concrete social relations and institutional systems that constitute the social world and give our discursive practices public form. This in turn means that we must attend to the material inequalities, forms of domination, and structural injustices that those systems produce and on which they depend, the oppressions produced by (amongst other things) capitalism and class, patriarchy and gender, white supremacy and race, and heterosexism and sexuality. Indeed, while we have so far assumed that the space of reasons is power-neutral, populated by symmetrically situated agents reciprocally recognising one another in the collaborative endeavour of rationally reconstructing the contents of each other's utterances, it is now incumbent on us to analyse the implications of the fact that social reality is structured through and through by inequalities within and between recognitive communities both contemporaneously and over time.⁴⁰

Yet despite what seems an all too obvious point, and even though the idea that language is an essentially social affair is a philosophical truism, the injunction to direct analysis towards the concrete institutional structures that constitute our normative lives has been heeded only rarely in the philosophy of

³⁸ Kukla, Rebecca, and Mark Lance. 2009. *'Yo!' and 'Lo!': The Pragmatic Topography of the Space of Reasons*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 156.

³⁹ Bauer, Nancy. 2015. *How to Do Things with Pornography*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 92. See also xiii.

⁴⁰ As Charles Mills famously argues, the default assumption in normative theory is that injustice is but an aberration to be corrected, not the norm, an assumption as preposterous as it is pernicious. See Mills, Charles W. 2005. "Ideal Theory" as Ideology? *Hypatia* 20 (3): 165–83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00493.x>. Given the centrality of concrete, normatively imbued discursive practice to linguistic pragmatism, the same criticism can be levelled against those pragmatic approaches in the philosophy of language which rely on similarly idealising assumptions. See Keiser, Jessica. 2023. *Non-Ideal Foundations of Language*. New York, NY: Routledge; Engelhardt, Jeff. 2024. *Nonideal Theory and Content Externalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; and McKenna, Robin. 2023. *Non-Ideal Epistemology*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192888822.001.0001>.

language.⁴¹ Indeed, even among linguistic pragmatists who are otherwise mindful of Wittgenstein's claim that "the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (*PI* §23), sustained analysis of the actual structure of the social systems which condition our lives is not forthcoming.⁴² Such a theoretical lacuna is plainly disastrous for the simple reason that *which* form of life we centre – that of, say, the American finance executive or the Dalit peasant farmer – will have a direct impact on what we take speaking a language to consist in. Even Brandom, who explicitly acknowledges that his is an "essentially political, because social, account of the nature of normativity", fails to make good on the demands to which such an acknowledgement commits him by persistently declining to pursue the kind of *social* analysis appropriate to the realities of inequality and oppression.⁴³ And while Brandom has since provided a treatment of the anti-authoritarianism to be found in Richard Rorty's pragmatism, an analysis which at least addresses the political implications of his account of recognition, the vision of post-modern liberalism he goes on to endorse is

⁴¹ Although recent years have seen what Manuel Almagro and Sergio Guerra call a "political turn" in analytic philosophy, Manuel de Pinedo and Neftalí Villanueva argue that much seemingly evaluative analysis in recent analytic philosophy is in reality descriptive since it is explicitly dependent on a set of values determined prior to evaluation. Evaluative analysis is in this sense just a means of describing the values assumed as given. Almagro, Manuel, and Sergio Guerra. 2023. 'There's a Certain Slant of Light: Three Attitudes toward the Political Turn in Analytic Philosophy'. *Metaphilosophy* 54 (2–3): 324–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/meta.12619> and Pinedo, Manuel de, and Neftalí Villanueva. 2022. 'Epistemic De-Platforming'. In *The Political Turn in Analytic Philosophy: Reflections on Social Justice and Oppression*, edited by David Bordonaba Plou, Víctor Fernández Castro, and José Ramón Torices. Boston, MA: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110612318-007>.

⁴² Some notable exceptions to this general lacuna include Crary, Alice. 2000. 'Wittgenstein's Philosophy in Relation to Political Thought'. In *The New Wittgenstein*, edited by Alice Crary and Rupert Read. New York, NY: Routledge; Crary, Alice. 2018. 'The Methodological Is Political: What's the Matter with "Analytic Feminism"?' *Radical Philosophy* 2 (2): 47–60; Crary, Alice. 2021. 'Wittgenstein Does Critical Theory'. In *Crisis and Critique: Philosophical Analysis and Current Events*, edited by Anne Siegetsleitner, Andreas Oberprantacher, Marie-Luisa Frick, and Ulrich Metschl. Berlin, DE: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110702255-027>; McGowan, Mary Kate. 2019. *Just Words: On Speech and Hidden Harm*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; Popa-Wyatt, Mihaela. Forthcoming. 'Norm-Shifting through Oppressive Acts'. In *Mind, Language, and Social Hierarchy: Constructing a Shared Social World*, edited by Sally Haslanger, Karen Jones, Greg Restall, François Schroeter, and Laura Schroeter; and Bauer, 2015. For a critical theoretic approach to this idea, see Jaeggi, Rahel. 2018. *Critique of Forms of Life*. Translated by Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

⁴³ Brandom, Robert. 2019a. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 521. Brandom goes on to claim that adopting forgiving cognitive attitudes is a "moral necessity" and elsewhere claims that the final third of *A Spirit of Trust* "is devoted precisely to extracting moral and political consequences from the account of normativity in terms of reciprocal recognition". Brandom, 2019a, 578 and Brandom, Robert. 2021. 'Replies to Honneth, McDowell, Pippin, and Stern'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (3): 743. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12852>. See also Bouché, Gilles. 2020. 'A Pure Philosophy of Language with an Edifying Intent: Brandom's Reply to Rorty'. In *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, edited by Gilles Bouché. New York, NY: Routledge and Knappik, Franz. 2020. 'Brandom on Postmodern Ethical Life: Moral and Political Problems'. In *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, edited by Gilles Bouché. New York, NY: Routledge.

simply not fine-grained enough to make sense of the non-ideal reality he is committed to accounting for.⁴⁴ Indeed, the central theme of the remainder of this chapter is that Brandom's failure to attend to the actual social and historical structures in which our discursive lives are embedded is ultimately what renders his response to genealogical anxiety unsatisfactory.⁴⁵

Bringing a social theory attentive to the material realities of oppression to bear on Brandom's account has far-reaching consequences for both its explanatory power and the project of this thesis. For if even the most promising response to the most powerful articulation of genealogical anxiety turns out to be deficient, then we may be faced with the unpalatable conclusion that genealogical anxiety – considered as a *philosophical* problem – is, in the final analysis, intractable. Indeed, the principle claim I shall defend in Chapter 5 is precisely that genealogical anxiety is an expression of alienation that will remain unless and until those conditions are eliminated. Nevertheless, availing ourselves of the social theoretic resources required to undertake the diagnostic project into which we have now descended is precisely what may help us chart a course through this philosophical terrain. Indeed, if there is any truth in Marx's adage that “mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve” (*P* 426), regarding genealogical anxiety as a distinctively *social* problem may enable us to discern a way towards its dissolution.

4.4 Three Orders of Oppression

With a renewed focus on the actual social and historical relations that condition discursive normativity, there are two broad areas of inquiry to which we must now turn. Firstly, how exactly does oppression structure the field of the semantic givens on which the viability of a two-stage metasemantic strategy depends? In

⁴⁴ See Brandom, Robert. 2022. *Pragmatism and Idealism: Rorty and Hegel on Representation and Reality*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. See also Brandom, Robert. 2019. *Heroism and Magnanimity: The Post-Modern Form of Self-Conscious Agency*. The Aquinas Lecture, 2019c. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press.

⁴⁵ A number of contributors have sought to extract radical political implications from Brandom's work over the years, but, as we shall see in Section 4.4, I am ultimately sceptical of the prospects of such a project. For an overview of such contributions, see Testa, Italo. 2003. ‘Hegelian Pragmatism and Social Emancipation: An Interview with Robert Brandom’. *Constellations* 10 (4): 554–70. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1351-0487.2003.00353.x>; Springs, Jason A. 2009. “‘Dismantling the Master's House’”: Freedom as Ethical Practice in Brandom and Foucault’. *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37 (3): 419–48. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2009.00393.x>; Fossen, Thomas. 2014. ‘Politicising Brandom's Pragmatism: Normativity and the Agonal Character of Social Practice’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 22 (3): 371–95. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2011.00504.x>; Vogelmann, Frieder. 2020. ‘Keep Score and Punish: Brandom's Concept of Responsibility’. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 46 (8): 922–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719866243>; and Rey, Santiago. 2024. ‘The Critical Dimension of Brandom's Normative Pragmatism’. *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 50 (10): 1520–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537231211036>.

what ways do oppressive social systems and the forms of ideological consciousness they generate produce the conditions for genealogical anxiety to be an intelligible response to the history, contingent or otherwise, of our own discursive practices? And secondly, does Brandom's account of conceptual content have the analytical resources to appropriately articulate the normative relations between an enriched picture of the social world, on the one hand, and the space of reasons, on the other? How, in other words, does Brandom's account fare when viewed through the lens of a social theoretic framework appropriately sensitive to the non-ideal reality of the social systems in which we move and have our being?

Setting out to answer these questions requires that we devote the remainder of this chapter to developing what I call a *three-tiered analysis of oppression*. The objective of presenting such a framework is to develop a progressively more complex, expansive, and nuanced picture of the ideological and discursive dynamics characteristic of oppressive social systems. In so doing, we shall outline both an account of genealogical anxiety's conditions of possibility and a heuristic device against which Brandom's account can be assessed. As we shall see, if Brandom's account is to deliver on its promise, then it requires that it be supplemented with an appropriate social theory. The problem, however, is that doing so introduces deep tensions for his philosophical account.

The three-tiered analysis I present is primarily indebted to Steven Lukes' three-dimensional analysis of power and to the three "orders" of epistemic exclusion identified by Kristie Dotson.⁴⁶ The goal of my analysis is to develop an ordered framework with which to distinguish between three structurally distinct, hierarchically organised forms of oppression, what I call *first-, second-, and third-order oppressions*. As I see it, first-order oppressions describe forms of direct domination – such as identity-based prejudice and discrimination – which result from *violating* broadly *unproblematic* norms. By contrast, second-order oppressions describe forms of indirect domination – such as uptake failure and discursive marginalisation

⁴⁶ See Lukes, Steven. 2004. *Power: A Radical View*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan and Dotson, Kristie. 2014. 'Conceptualising Epistemic Oppression'. *Social Epistemology* 28 (2): 115–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2013.782585>. See also Pohlhaus, Jr, Gaile. 2020. 'Epistemic Agency Under Oppression'. *Philosophical Papers* 49 (2): 233–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2020.1780149>. I also draw on the general three-tiered model of epistemic exchange (TTEX) developed by Catarina Dutilh Novaes in Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2020b. 'The Role of Trust in Argumentation'. *Informal Logic* 40 (2): 205–36. <https://doi.org/10.22329/il.v40i2.6328>; Dutilh Novaes, 2023a; Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2023b. 'The (Higher-Order) Evidential Significance of Attention and Trust – Comments on Levy's *Bad Beliefs*'. *Philosophical Psychology* 36 (4): 792–807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2023.2174845>; and Dutilh Novaes, Catarina. 2023c. 'Can Arguments Change Minds?' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 123 (2): 173–98. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoad006>.

– which result from *abiding* by norms which are *themselves* problematic. Finally, third-order oppressions describe forms of indirect domination – such as expressive disablement – which result from *frustrating* the formulation of the very norms capable of giving conceptual shape to the experiences of subjugated groups. With each order articulating progressively less tractable forms of oppression, this framework foregrounds the often surreptitious ways in which asymmetric recognitive relations institute exclusionary patterns of normative authority and in which patterns of discursive exclusion preclude subordinated groups from participating in the recollective determination of our shared discursive resources.

Attending to the inequitable realities of social interaction raises major questions for the plausibility of Brandom's account. As we shall see across Sections 4.4.1-4.4.3, while Brandom does go some way to addressing the problems that first-order oppressions raise for his account of discursive normativity, he fails to do so in relation to second- and third-order oppressions. I shall go on to show that while Brandom's account could be adapted to account for second-order oppressions (albeit with questionable cogency), the very structure of its historical-recollective component renders a comparable extension strategy in response to the issues raised by third-order oppressions unavailable to him. Given that third-order oppressions are uniquely implicated in the constitution of our background frameworks, this means that Brandom's aim of reconciling us to the contingency of our discursive practices – and hence of ameliorating genealogical anxiety – ultimately does not survive contact with socio-historical reality. In pursuing this line of argument, I do not intend to present a series of objections to Brandom, but rather to use him as a foil to make explicit the consequences of failing to discern the deep connection between the material structure of society and the structure of discursive normativity. In so doing, I aim to highlight what taking the rule-following paradox and genealogical anxiety seriously actually involves.

4.4.1 First-Order Oppressions: The Master-Slave Relation as a Model of Asymmetric Recognitive Relations

Let's begin by examining the dimension of oppression to which Brandom *does* devote attention: the forms of normative inequality arising from recognitive asymmetries within a linguistic community. The puzzle that prompts Brandom's analysis is that even though the social-recognitive relations that bootstrap 'merely natural' agentive dyads into the normative realm must be reciprocal if they are to institute genuinely binding rational norms, it is nevertheless the case that we find ourselves in the space of reasons without perfect reciprocity. Indeed, the structure of contemporary social relations – in which pockets of recognitive

reciprocity exist alongside recognitive asymmetries, both of which are situated in a broader context of systematic material inequality – suggests that the reciprocity condition on normative authority may, upon closer inspection, turn out to be too strong. It is with a view to solving this puzzle that Brandom distinguishes between what he calls “defective” and “nondefective” forms of social recognition.⁴⁷ Before we can turn to Brandom’s analysis of defective social recognition however, we must first characterise the general structure and conditions that produce them through an analysis of the recognitive asymmetries typical of first-order oppression.

A paradigm of first-order oppression is what Miranda Fricker calls “testimonial injustice”, the persistent and systematic attribution of “a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer”.⁴⁸ Consider, for instance, a female member of an otherwise all male corporate board. The board’s governing articles, charters, and bylaws explicitly state that the contributions of all board members ought to be treated with equal deliberative significance. Nevertheless, while equally licensed to participate in the board’s deliberations, the female board member’s contributions are persistently dismissed on account of her gender, perhaps due to the unconscious biases (or explicit prejudices) of the male board members. Fricker argues that the female board member suffers a specifically epistemic injustice as a knower as a result of her identity. Yet while unjustly excluded from equal participation in the board’s decision-making, the injustice she faces is not a result of the norms governing, albeit imperfectly, the board’s deliberative procedure, but from the violation of those norms. The female board member is wronged not by the norms governing the discursive context, but by their flawed implementation. She updates the conversational score, but her illocutions and perlocutions systematically fail to come off. When this kind of injustice is experienced pervasively and systematically, it is a form of (first-order) oppression.

As I see it, the defining characteristic of first-order oppressions is that they play out *within* an otherwise uncontested discursive context, that is, within a shared language game. The wrong or injustice of a first-order oppression is thus the result, as Dotson puts it, of the “incompetent functioning” of a system

⁴⁷ Brandom, 2019a, 314 and 342. See also Brandom, 2019a, Ch. 10: Allegories of Mastery: The Pragmatic and Semantic Basis of the Metaphysical Incoherence of Authority without Responsibility.

⁴⁸ Fricker, 2007, 28. See also Code, Lorraine. 1991. *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press and Code, Lorraine. 2014a. ‘Feminist Epistemology and the Politics of Knowledge: Questions of Marginality’. In *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Mary Evans, Clare Hemmings, Marsha Henry, Hazel Johnstone, Sumi Madhok, Ania Plomien, and Sadie Wearing. London, UK: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473909502.n1>.

of values or beliefs, not of the values or beliefs themselves.⁴⁹ First-order oppression is, in other words, the consequence of applying an otherwise unproblematic – indeed, frequently laudable – set of norms or principles in such a way as to produce patterns of domination or marginalisation.

First-order oppressions and the injustices they produce are typically the objects of analysis of what Lukes calls “the one-dimensional view” of power.⁵⁰ According to the one-dimensional view, power should be thought of as the influence one wields “in the making of *decisions* on issues over which there is an observable *conflict* of (subjective) *interests*, seen as express policy preferences”.⁵¹ An agent has power on this picture insofar as she is able to successfully pursue courses of action that further her interests in the face of competing proposals, that is, insofar as she can successfully override others’ policy preferences in pursuit of her own. This means, as Robert Dahl puts it, that “*A* has power over *B* to the extent that he [*she*] can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do”.⁵² Once again, the key point here is that the decision-making procedures, proposed objects of deliberation, and discursive norms that constitute the deliberative context are not themselves at issue. Instead, power is conceived as a counterfactually-defined capacity that an agent exercises over another within that deliberative context, their explicitly articulated preferences simply winning out. That the exercise of power on the one-dimensional view takes place against the backdrop of an otherwise accepted way of going on is why it typically appears in the form of explicit coercion, i.e., as exclusion from or subordination within a social system, as Dotson puts it, whose “schemata itself is not problematic”.⁵³

This dynamic can also be brought into view when considering how first-order oppressions might be remedied. Dotson, for one, notes that the resolution of such forms of injustice typically involves the “attempt[...] to make one’s behaviour reflect one’s beliefs and values” rather than the attempt to change the beliefs and values themselves.⁵⁴ In our example, that might take the form of male board members taking implicit bias training in order to align their discursive conduct with the norms encoded in the board’s governing charter, norms which they presumably endorse. Once again, however, the key point is that

⁴⁹ Dotson, 2014, 123.

⁵⁰ Lukes, 2004, 16-9.

⁵¹ Lukes, 2004, 19.

⁵² Dahl, Robert A. 1957. ‘The Concept of Power’. *Behavioral Science* 2 (3): 202-3.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/bs.3830020303>.

⁵³ Dotson, 2014, 118.

⁵⁴ Dotson, 2014, 118.

instances of first-order oppression exhibit the structure of a frustrated realisation of a given norm on the basis of a contravention that does not otherwise bring the norms governing the discursive context into question.

With the basic outline of first-order oppressions sketched, we can now turn to Brandom's attempt at addressing their impact on discursive practice within the terms of his accounts of social recognition and historical recollection. Brandom endeavours to model defective normative relations in terms of recognitive asymmetries between discursive agents. For Brandom, injustice arises as a result of violating the recognitive reciprocity necessary to institute non-defective relations of normative authority. Such recognitive asymmetries, when systematically correlated with identity factors such as group membership or social position, can be thought of as first-order oppressions.⁵⁵

The archetype of asymmetric recognitive relations is the unreciprocated recognition dramatised in Hegel's allegory of the "life-and-death struggle" (*PG* §187), the clash of self-consciousnesses from which the victor emerges as master and the vanquished as slave (*PG* §§178-96).⁵⁶ In heightening the asymmetry between the two poles of the recognitive dyad, Hegel's allegory aims to illuminate the general normative dynamics which constitute the pathologies pervading non-egalitarian societies. Indeed, Hegel uses his analysis of the master-slave relation as a means of theorising the asymmetric normative relations between the Prussian state and its citizens while Brandom argues that it can account for the defective normative structure of patriarchal gender relations.⁵⁷ While we need not recount the details of Hegel's allegory, the key point for our purposes is that the asymmetry of their encounter violates the reciprocity required for the

⁵⁵ For additional discussion of the distinctively political nature of recognition, see Taylor, Charles. 1992a. *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition': An Essay*. Edited by Amy Gutmann. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; Honneth, Axel. 2021b. *Recognition: A Chapter in the History of European Ideas*. Translated by Joseph Ganahl. The Seeley Lectures. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; Honneth, Axel. 1996. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translated by Joel Anderson. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; and Honneth, Axel. 2021a. 'Demoralising Recognition: Comments on R. Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust*'. Translated by Alex Englander. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 103 (3): 714–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12853>. Cf. Fraser, Nancy, and Axel Honneth. 2004. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*. Translated by Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke. London, UK: Verso; Fraser, Nancy. 1995. 'From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a "Post-Socialist" Age'. *New Left Review* 1 (212): 68–93; and Fraser, Nancy. 2000. 'Rethinking Recognition'. *New Left Review* 1 (3): 107–20.

⁵⁶ "Herrschaft und Knechtschaft" – and the associated "Herr" and "Knecht" – have been translated in a number of different ways. While the A. V. Miller translation cited here translates the original German phrases as "lordship and bondage", and "lord" and "bondsmen" respectively, a more accurate translation would be "mastery and slavery", and "master" and "slave". I thus use these terms instead.

⁵⁷ See Brandom, 2019a, 483-5.

institution of genuine normative authority.⁵⁸ On the one hand, the slave is made, on pain of death, to recognise the normative authority of the master *qua* recogniser. On the other, the master takes herself to be exempt from the reciprocal requirement to recognise the normative authority of the slave *qua* recogniser – the very condition on which genuinely binding normative authority depends – because the master regards the slave as a mere object. This means, in the philosophical idiom elaborated in Section 3.4.1.2, that the master demands that her normative authority to attribute normative statuses (in this case, the normative status of ‘recogniser’) be recognised by the slave while refusing to recognise the slave’s authority to do so in relation to her. Since the master denies the responsibility she incurs to recognise the authority of the slave recognising her, this means that the master conceives of the structure of her agential authority according to the normatively defective schema Brandom calls “pure independence”.⁵⁹ In contrast to the reciprocal authority and responsibility characteristic of freedom, an agent conceives of itself as purely independent in taking itself to be a form of “consciousness that makes things so by taking them so”.⁶⁰ Whereas genuine normative authority essentially involves a moment of correlative responsibility insofar as the recognising agent becomes *responsible* for recognising what the agent they recognise recognises, the master denies any form of responsibility to the slave and therefore conceives of her representations as immediately constitutive of her normative status *qua* master and of the slave’s *qua* slave.⁶¹ The master-slave relation is hence the paradigm of first-order oppression because the relation of pure independence on which it is predicated violates the norm of reciprocity governing authentic social recognition.

One of the central lessons of the *Phenomenology* is that such accounts of normative authority are not just defective, but incoherent – indeed, self-defeating. For while the master may think of her authority as the absence of a correlative responsibility to the slave over which she has dominion, in reality the institution of that authority depends on the slave’s recognitive attribution of the authority to attribute normative statuses to the master, an authority to which the master is in fact responsible. There is, *contra* the master,

⁵⁸ For an analysis which renders the master-slave dialectic conceptually primary, see Kojève, Alexandre. 1980. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*. Edited by Allan Bloom. Translated by James H. Nichols, Jr. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

⁵⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 329-32.

⁶⁰ Brandom, 2019a, 330.

⁶¹ As noted below, it is of course the case that masters can enter into symmetric recognitive relations with other masters and hence may bear relations of responsibility to one another. Nevertheless, the recognitive relation which *constitutes* the master *qua* master is the *asymmetric* recognitive relation that obtains between her and the slave.

simply no such thing as a relation of authority that does not at least implicitly incur a relation of responsibility. This means, as Brandom notes, that the incoherence of pure independence is not merely a consequence of the trivial point – a point the master denies – that “if X has authority over Y then Y is responsible to X, and *vice versa*”, but rather, as seen in Section 3.4.1.2, that “X’s authority always also involves a correlative responsibility by X”.⁶²

In claiming normative authority over the slave while simultaneously denying the reciprocal responsibility on which such a claim depends, the master finds herself in a philosophically precarious position. Comparing the situation to that of a celebrity who holds their own fans beneath contempt, Brandom argues that the “pathology” of mastery consists in being

made what one is by being so taken by people one has no respect for, whose judgment one dismisses, whose *authority* one in no sense acknowledges. In short, one is made what one is by being thought wonderful by people one does not believe can tell what is wonderful, people to whose opinions one attributes no weight, people one takes to have no *right* to assess such things. One’s status is instituted by attitudes one does not take to have any authority.⁶³

Indeed, Orlando Patterson, in his study of the institutional dynamics of slavery, explains that Hegel’s key insight is that authority without responsibility “contradicts itself by its very existence, for total domination can become a form of extreme dependence on the object of one’s power, and total powerlessness can become the secret path to control of the subject that attempts to exercise such power”.⁶⁴ With the master’s status *qua* master dependent on the normative attitudes of an agent to which she does not – indeed, because master, cannot – attribute normative authority, the master finds herself in the self-defeating bind of holding a self-conception at odds with the very ability to articulate it. For were she to attempt to assert to the slave that she is master, the slave’s uptake could not have any possible significance for her, thereby undermining the status of her utterance as an assertion. Brandom’s account duly has the resources to condemn asymmetric cognitive relations, albeit solely on account of their formal incoherence.

Within the domain delineated by first-order oppression, the master-slave relation serves as a reasonable model of the inequalities and power-dynamics structuring the space of reasons. For as in the

⁶² Brandom, 2019a, 25.

⁶³ Brandom, 2019a, 341-2.

⁶⁴ Patterson, Orlando. 1982. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2.

case of the female board member, the principal injustice suffered by the slave is not a product of the norms governing social recognition themselves, but of their violation. In conceiving of authority on the model of pure independence, oppression takes the form – as on the one-dimensional view of power – of coercion, Hegel’s theorisation of the issue through the master-slave relation particularly apt given how clearly it models the circumstances in which an agent can, as Dahl puts it, get someone else to do something they otherwise would not. Brandom’s appropriation of the allegory enables thus us to make sense of the normative dynamics at play in a number of concrete situations characterised by asymmetric recognitive relations such as dehumanisation and identity-based discrimination.

There are, however, two significant problems with this view, both of which stem from the unrepresentative conception of the social it assumes. Firstly, while Brandom does acknowledge the possibility of (normatively defective) “extended recognitive communit[ies]” in which recognition is not perfectly reciprocated amongst all members, he apparently fails to realise that this shifts the issue of recognition – and its incoherence when unreciprocated – from an agentive to an *institutional* register.⁶⁵ Brandom contends that the institution of a recognitive community does not demand that all its members recognise all others. Rather, in recognising an agent, a recogniser is merely committed (incurs a responsibility) to recognising the agents the recognised agent recognises. Whether the recogniser actually does recognise those other agents she is committed to recognising is, however, another question. Those who are recognised yet fail to reciprocate such recognition are members of the recognitive community in an extended sense insofar as they have been *invited* to join it while those who recognise a member of the recognitive community yet are not recognised in return have *petitioned* to enter it. Within this idiom, the slave petitions to enter the recognitive community but is refused entry.

It is precisely this point that Patterson highlights as essential to the functioning of slave societies. For as he notes, “the slave’s ... yearning for disalienation and relief from the master’s all-embracing power” means that masters regularly “hold[...] out the promise of redemption” as one of “the principal means of motivating the slave”.⁶⁶ This means, however, that the incoherence that defective recognitive structures exhibit is “transformed from a personal into an institutional dialectic, in which slavery, as an enduring social

⁶⁵ Brandom, 2019a, 296-7.

⁶⁶ Patterson, 1982, 101.

process, [stands] opposite to and require[s] manumission as an essential precondition”.⁶⁷ For if an agent who petitions to enter a recognitive community (in this case, a community of masters) is, as Brandom admits, a member of the community in an extended sense, the issue is no longer how a single master relates to a single slave, but rather how a *class* of masters relates to a *class* of slaves.⁶⁸

The second problem with Brandom’s account of defective normative relations is the fact that he appears to assume that the contributions of differentially situated discursive participants enter into the discursive arena on an equal footing, an assumption that he himself is committed to rejecting. According to the master-slave model, unreciprocated recognitive structures emerge when the legitimate authority of a discursive agent is unduly discredited. As Brandom puts it, the master “denies responsibility to ... *other subjects*” by way of “den[ying] the authority of others”.⁶⁹ On this picture, the master denies that the slave’s attempts to update the conversational score – their ‘moves’ in the language game – carry with them binding normative force. This assumes, however, that the master recognises the slave’s discursive activity *as* discursive activity at all – their concept uses *as* concept uses, their assertions *as* assertions – insofar as such episodes must first be *designated* as the kinds of episodes they are.⁷⁰ Indeed, to suggest otherwise, that instances of discursive practice transparently tell us what they are, is to endorse Sellars’ infamous Myth of the Given. It is, however, precisely the fact that the discursive moves of marginalised agents, regardless of their correctness or incorrectness, fail to be recognised *as* moves which both eliminates the possibility of reciprocal recognition and, as we shall see in Sections 4.4.2 and 4.4.3, constitutes the linguistic preconditions of second- and third-order oppressions.⁷¹ With their discursive contributions falling outside the bounds of recognisable discursive practice, the slave is not a subordinate whose contributions, like the female board-

⁶⁷ Patterson, 1982, 101. For additional discussion of Hegel’s account of the master-slave relation in the context of real institutional dynamics, see Gray, Biko Mandela, and Ryan J. Johnson. 2023. *Phenomenology of Black Spirit*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.

⁶⁸ As we shall see in Section 5.4, Hegel does indeed take the institutional manifestations of oppressive social relations seriously, the problem being that that analysis is not appropriately sensitive to the material circumstances of their institutionalisation. My point here, by contrast, is that Brandom does not even acknowledge the seriousness with which the former issue demands to be taken.

⁶⁹ Brandom, 2019a, 315.

⁷⁰ Cf. *PI* §90 and Cavell, Stanley. 1962. ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy’. *The Philosophical Review* 71 (1): 86. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183682>.

⁷¹ As Jennifer Hornsby notes, this is also why reciprocity is so vital a condition on successful linguistic exchange. As she puts it, “an audience who participates reciprocally does not merely understand the speaker’s words but also, in taking the words as they are meant to be taken, satisfies a condition for the speaker’s having done the communicative thing that she intended”. Hornsby, Jennifer. 1995. ‘Disempowered Speech’. *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2): 134. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199523211>.

member, are dismissed, but rather what Tracey Skelton calls a “present-absence” within the discursive community.⁷² By implicating discursive dynamics that cannot be accounted for within its own terms, the master-slave relation, as the paradigm of first-order oppression, duly points beyond itself. It is to that horizon of inquiry that we now turn.

4.4.2 Second-Order Oppressions: Uptake Failure, Positional Authority, and the Social Division of Linguistic Labour

Modelling first-order oppressions on the recognitive asymmetry dramatised in the master-slave relation is a useful way of conceptualising the operative dynamics of explicitly coercive forms of domination. For both Brandom and Hegel, the absolute authority of the master and absolute subservience, i.e., responsibility, of the slave captures the essential dynamics underlying all forms of normative pathology. As we shall see however, this is far too heavy an argumentative burden to place on the idea of recognitive asymmetry alone since, among other things, it fails to capture the distinctively *structural* dynamics of oppression. This means that if we are to understand defective normative relations in specifically *social* terms, that is, in terms beyond the recognitive relations obtaining between otherwise isolated agents, we must adopt a perspective able to make sense of the way that discursive activity is structured in and through the various social systems in which it is embedded. As we shall see, the consequences of failing to do so are disastrous.

We can begin this task by taking seriously the demand to analyse discursive practice in view of the fact that oppressed agents are not only treated unequally *in* the space of reasons, but that they do not *enter* it on an equal footing either. Indeed, the point is not just that oppressive patterns of discursive practice are the result of violating given discursive norms, but that what is even conceivable as an instance of discursive practice in the space of reasons – what can even aspire to update the conversational score regardless of whether or not it is successful in doing so – is conditioned by the structure of social relations.

Making the structural dynamics of language-entry moves visible demands that we turn to the notion of *second-order oppression*. Continuing the analogy from Section 4.4.1, while the female board member finds herself the victim of a *first-order* oppression insofar as the norms governing the board’s deliberative procedures are violated in their implementation, she finds herself the victim of a *second-order* oppression

⁷² Skelton, Tracey. 2022. ‘Absent-Presence Present-Absence: Places, Spaces, Rights for Young People’. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 113 (2): 170–78. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12512>.

were she to be stripped of her voting power or debarred from the board entirely in virtue of a corporate statute that explicitly excludes women. Whereas first-order oppressions arise as a result of some kind of *incongruence* between intention and outcome, second-order oppressions arise as a result of *achieving* an exclusionary normative regime. Her illocutions do not simply fail to come off, but fail to update the conversational score at all. Where her contributions were previously dismissed, they are now subject to what we might call *uptake failure*.⁷³

In contrast to first-order oppressions, which result from the inefficient, biased, or unequal implementation of otherwise unproblematic normative resources, second-order oppressions “point”, as Dotson puts it, “to limitations within those resources themselves”.⁷⁴ This means that while first-order oppressions play out *within* a given discursive context, second-order oppressions characterise how the normative structure of that discursive context produces forms of marginalisation and injustice by making certain features of social reality salient to analysis while obscuring others. Second-order oppressions are thus not the result of violating or improperly implementing a set of otherwise acceptable norms. Rather, they are the result of successfully implementing a normative regime that expressly functions to the advantage of some and the detriment of others.

Just as first-order oppressions can be illuminated through Lukes’ one-dimensional view of power, so too can second-order oppressions be illuminated through what he calls the “two-dimensional view”.⁷⁵ On the two-dimensional view, in addition to the control that agents exert over the conduct of others and in determining the results of the decision-making processes in which they are engaged, power consists in “the ways in which *decisions* are prevented from being taken on *potential issues* over which there is an observable *conflict* of (subjective) *interests*”.⁷⁶ Whereas power on the one-dimensional view is simply the capacity of an agent to determine the outcome of a given contest, the second dimension of analysis that Lukes introduces enables us to identify and articulate the way that power manifests as the control one exerts over the determination of the courses of action up for debate. As Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz put it, “to the extent that a person or group – consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public

⁷³ For additional analysis of the discursive dynamics of such practices of silencing, see Langton, Rae. 1993. ‘Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts’. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (4): 293–330.

⁷⁴ Dotson, 2014, 126-7.

⁷⁵ Lukes, 2004, 20-5.

⁷⁶ Lukes, 2004, 25.

airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power”.⁷⁷ The result is that second-order oppressions, in comparison to the overt coercion typical of their first-order counterparts, typically manifest as the influence one exerts over the structure and limits of the field of discursive possibility itself.

While Brandom’s account has the conceptual resources to theorise the first-order oppressions that distort the structure of recognitive relations (although how well it does so is another question), it simply does not have the resources to make sense of second-order oppressions. And while it may be possible to modify Brandom’s account to remedy this flaw, whether we can legitimately call the resulting picture Brandomian is far from certain.

That Brandom’s account is inadequately sensitive to the analytic demands of second-order oppressions can be shown by highlighting the distinction between what Lynne Tirrell calls “positional authority and expertise authority”.⁷⁸ The significance of this distinction can be brought into relief by comparing Tirrell’s argument with Fricker’s account of testimonial injustice. For Fricker, testimonial injustice articulates the wrong done to the members of marginalised groups whose discursive contributions are systematically attributed less credibility than they in fact warrant. The discursive authority that their *expertise* as knowers warrants is objectionably undermined due to prejudice on the part of the hearer. Tirrell argues, however, that socially marginalised speakers are often debarred from even participating in language games in which credibility ascriptions figure due to their subordinate social *position*, their authority to exercise what J. L. Austin calls verdictive and exercitive speech illegitimately curtailed.⁷⁹ Adopting Sellars’ analysis of language-entry, intralinguistic, and language-exit transitions, Tirrell argues that we ought to shift our focus from the often inequitable distribution of authority *within* a particular discursive context to the dynamics of what she calls “nonneutral entrance moves” and, in so doing, reorient our attention towards the norms governing who is authorised to play which discursive games at all.⁸⁰ Tirrell duly contends that because Fricker’s account of testimonial injustice lacks the conceptual resources to articulate the positional

⁷⁷ Bachrach, Peter, and Morton S. Baratz. 1970. *Power and Poverty: Theory and Practice*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 8.

⁷⁸ Tirrell, Lynne. 2018. ‘Authority and Gender: Flipping the F-Switch’. *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (3). 2. <https://doi.org/10.5206/fpq/2018.3.5772>.

⁷⁹ See Austin, J. L. 1962. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press. Lecture XI, esp. §§1-2. See also Langton, 1993, 304.

⁸⁰ Tirrell, 2018, 8. See also Sellars, Wilfrid. 2007a. ‘Some Reflections on Language Games’. In *In the Space of Reasons: Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, edited by Kevin Scharp and Robert Brandom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

considerations that condition language-entry moves, it can seem as if “men and women are in the same game and women simply fail to score”.⁸¹ As Tirrell continues, this renders invisible the way that attributions of positional authority

often activate[...] a mechanism that shapes the scope and force of a speaker’s capacity to make discursive moves, which is a component of authority. The mechanism functions, in some sense, prior to evaluations of the content of what the speaker says, and so is, in some sense, logically prior to epistemic considerations of merit and weight.⁸²

In comparison to testimonial injustice which captures how a knower’s discursive contributions fail to receive the credibility attributions they are due because of misfiring credibility attribution norms, Tirrell instead highlights “the importance of noticing who gets into the game, whose entrance is precluded or challenged, and why” since “only *players* make the illocutionary moves they think they are making”.⁸³

Taking the discursive lives of women as an exemplar of this dynamic, Tirrell argues that “women’s status *as* women undermines our [*sic*] discursive authority because sex marking in semantics functions as a master switch on what we say – a switch that, once thrown, changes the very game on us, whether we know it or not”.⁸⁴ As the title of her paper suggests, Tirrell claims that positional considerations can even change the game that marginalised participants think they are playing beneath their very feet. For, as she continues, flipping the master switch in this way means that

scorekeeping itself changes: some moves, for example, that are usually taken to be legal and open to all, perhaps even constitutive of the game, now become fouls when made by women. Seeing gender attribution as a master switch on the semantic index highlights that male and female speakers are often, in fact, engaged in variant language games, with different rules and disparate outcomes.⁸⁵

Indeed, precisely because the difficulty lies in “identifying who counts as a peer within the game” and who does not, excluding an agent from discursive participation all together by changing the language game being

⁸¹ Tirrell, 2018, 4.

⁸² Tirrell, 2018, 4.

⁸³ Tirrell, 2018, 7.

⁸⁴ Tirrell, 2018, 4.

⁸⁵ Tirrell, 2018, 7.

played rather than by degrading her moves within it can be a more effective, because less explicit, means of sustaining oppression.⁸⁶

The fact that Tirrell's analysis brings such questions to the fore at all is why it offers a richer analysis of non-ideal discursive relations than the resources afforded by an account of first-order oppression. Indeed, in foregrounding the idea that speakers must first be permitted entry into a linguistic practice, permission often qualified or withheld altogether on the basis of social position, Tirrell echoes Pierre Bourdieu's point that the illocutionary force of an utterance is not just a function of its propositional content and its relevant felicity conditions. Rather, Bourdieu claims that "what speaks is not the utterance, ... but the whole social person" since, as he notes elsewhere, the illocutionary force (or what he would call the "symbolic" efficacy) of a speech act requires that the listener first "recognise[...] the person who exercises it as authorised to do so".⁸⁷

Introducing the notion of positional authority as a logically prior condition on the exercise of expertise authority has acute repercussions for the cogency of Brandom's project. The keenest implication of this move can be made salient through Hilary Putnam's account of the social division of linguistic labour.⁸⁸ As discussed in Section 3.4.1.2, Putnam contends that the members of a linguistic community can legitimately use terms whose precise assertability conditions are not generally known so long as a subset of the community is able, when required, to determine when our those conditions are satisfied and what exactly satisfies them, i.e., when our meanings apply and what they apply to. The advantage of Putnam's account in the present context is that the socialised distinction between the semantic and the epistemic builds in the conceptual space to account for the positional considerations that Tirrell brings into focus. Yet Putnam does not seem to realise the full import of this conclusion. For if the exercise of a speaker's *expertise* authority to, say, determine the chemical composition of two seemingly identical transparent, tasteless, odourless liquids is conditional upon others acknowledging her *positional* authority as a chemist, an acknowledgement

⁸⁶ Tirrell, 2018, 7.

⁸⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977b. 'The Economics of Linguistic Exchanges'. *Social Science Information* 16 (6): 653. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847701600601> and Bourdieu, Pierre. 1991c. 'Authorised Language: The Social Conditions for the Effectiveness of Ritual Discourse'. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John B. Thompson, translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. 116.

⁸⁸ See Putnam, Hilary. 1975. 'The Meaning of "Meaning"'. In *Philosophical Papers*. Vol. 2: Mind, Language and Reality. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511625251.014>. Cf. Burge, Tyler. 1979. 'Individualism and the Mental'. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 4 (1): 73–121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4975.1979.tb00374.x>.

vulnerable to the kinds of identity-based prejudice typical of first-order oppression, then the question of *who* is able to determine when our meanings apply and when they do not is of the utmost importance.⁸⁹ The problem duly facing Brandom is that in accepting the broad strokes of Putnam's argument while similarly failing to attend to the social forces that structure our attributions of positional authority, he denies himself the philosophical resources to analyse the ways in which defective social relations do not simply hinder the *implementation* of non-defective discursive relations (as is the case if viewed through the lens of the master-slave relation alone), but also *constitute* defective discursive relations.

The consequences of failing to analyse how expertise authority is conditioned by positional authority are nothing short of disastrous. For one, the fact that the distribution of positional authority, and hence expertise authority, is governed by entirely contingent social forces establishes an obvious pathway through which genealogical anxiety can take hold. For if the experts who determine which parts of the world our meanings apply to are granted their (perceived) authority on the basis of their contingent, rationally irrelevant social position, then it is easy to see why we might be sceptical about the rational bindingness of the meanings so ordained.

For another, if it turns out (as is commonly the case) that the inhabitants of a given social position are overrepresented among those deemed to hold expertise authority, then given, as argued in Section 3.4.2, that our concepts are in a sense the products of their histories of use, there is the distinct possibility that the very *content* of our concepts will fail to trace the contours of reality since they will tend to align with those parts of the world encountered by those who inhabit that social position. Indeed, should the social division of linguistic labour replicate the unequal, hierarchised, power-sensitive divisions of social reality, then those entrusted with the authority to determine which parts of the world correspond to our meanings are likely to simply reproduce their own perspective.⁹⁰ This threatens to render entire swathes of human experience

⁸⁹ Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway argue that gendered inequalities in scientific practice typically result in objectionable lacunae since the kinds of enterprises deemed worthy of investigation and the standards of empirical adequacy developed within a patriarchal culture tend to reproduce existing, dominating patterns of salience. See Harding, Sandra. 1991. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press and Haraway, Donna. 1988. 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective'. *Feminist Studies* 14 (3): 575–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>. For an extensive analysis of the impacts of scientific bias on women's well-being, see Criado Perez, Caroline. 2019. *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. London, UK: Chatto & Windus.

⁹⁰ As noted in Section 4.2.1, Marx and Engels argue that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one,

conceptually unintelligible since the corners of human life that putative experts tend to encounter will be made salient to analysis while those they do not will be obscured.⁹¹

Yet worst of all, these patterns of salience and invisibility in our shared discursive resources, what Jürgen Habermas calls “systematically distorted communication”, serve an overt *ideological* function.⁹² For in making salient the perspectives of certain social positions while obscuring others, the field of intelligible, conceptually articulated forms of life available for uptake impedes our consideration of the full range of candidate responses to the material, social, and historical circumstances in which we find ourselves. This not only precludes the deliberation of alternatives to the present mode of social organisation, but also serves to manufacture continued adherence to the existing one. This shows, moreover, that second-order oppression points towards social phenomena which require additional theoretical resources to explain just as first-order oppression pointed towards social phenomena which required an account of second-order oppression to explain.

As we saw in Section 4.4.1, while Brandom’s conception of the master-slave relation is (to some extent) able to capture the operative dynamics of first-order oppressions, it is incapable of making sense of second-order oppressions. Brandom’s reliance on the master-slave relation as the sole heuristic for making sense of oppression is thus woefully inadequate. Given that positional authority is explanatorily prior to expertise authority, this means that an account of the social and material inequalities structuring the distribution of positional authority is critical for a plausible account of reciprocal recognition. Indeed, without such an analysis, Brandom’s claim that recognition is the prediscursive condition of normative authority appears plainly false. Nevertheless, I see no reason why Brandom’s account could not in theory

therefore, the ideas of its dominance” (*GI* 192). Cf. *PI* §114: “One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing’s nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it”.

⁹¹ For discussions of the ethical and political dynamics of hegemonic patterns of salience and invisibility, see Mills, Charles W. 2007. ‘White Ignorance’. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2007. ‘Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types’. In *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, edited by Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press; Code, Lorraine. 2004. ‘The Power of Ignorance’. *Philosophical Papers* 33 (3): 291–308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05568640409485144>; Code, Lorraine. 2008. ‘Advocacy, Negotiation, and the Politics of Unknowing’. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy, Spindel Supplement: Global Feminist Ethics and Politics* 46 (s1): 32–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2008.tb00152.x>; Code, Lorraine. 2014. ‘Ignorance, Injustice and the Politics of Knowledge: Feminist Epistemology Now’. *Australian Feminist Studies* 29 (80): 148–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2014.928186>.

⁹² Habermas, Jürgen. 1970. ‘On Systematically Distorted Communication’. *Inquiry* 13 (1–4): 205–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201747008601590>. Cf. Brandom, Robert. 2015. ‘Towards Reconciling Two Heroes: Habermas and Hegel’. *Argumenta* 1 (1). 31. <https://doi.org/10.14275/2465-2334/20151.BRA>.

be amended by supplementing it with a social theory appropriately sensitive to those inequalities and the realities of second-order oppression. However, as noted in Section 4.3, his recent attempt at developing a Rortian social theory falls considerably short of the mark. As presently construed, Brandom's account is thus incomplete at best. As we shall see in Section 4.4.3, the issue Brandom faces is that attempting to supplement his account with a reasonable social theory introduces fatal problems for his philosophical theory.

4.4.3 Third-Order Oppressions: Hermeneutical Injustice and Expressive Disablement

While untheorised *de dicto*, Brandom's account does appear to have the space for the kind of social theoretic supplementation that could sensitise it to the realities of second-order oppression. Yet despite this potential source of critical leverage, Brandom is incapable of accounting for third-order oppressions due to the very structure of the historical-recollective component of his argument. With third-order oppressions among the most pernicious forms of domination given their invisibility and recalcitrance to amelioration, this means that Brandom's account does not, in the final analysis, survive contact with the material realities of the social world. Nevertheless, the fact that the most promising means of remedying genealogical anxiety ultimately falls short should not simply be taken as an indication of its inadequacy, but rather as an expression of genealogical anxiety's deep connection with the material social pathologies pervading the normative structure of modernity. That, anyway, is the claim I shall argue for in Chapter 5.

What, then, is a third-order oppression? Taking up our analogy of the female board member once more, while she finds herself the victim of a *second-order* oppression upon being denied a seat on the board despite being qualified to do so, she would find herself the victim of a *third-order* oppression were she unable to articulate her petition for a seat in the first place. There are two primary ways in which this incapacitation might manifest. On the one hand, the female board member may inhabit a public culture which lacks the conceptual resources to articulate her pretheoretical intuition that she would be a suitable candidate. On this view, she is, for lack of alternatives, compelled to articulate her vision of the world, others, and herself through the very conceptual resources that sustain her subjugation, the possible ways in which the discursive score can be updated restricted to a narrow range of possibilities amenable to her continued domination. For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this is the sense in which "the subaltern cannot

speak".⁹³ On the other hand, the female board member may not even be able to form such an intuition because the process of subjectivation through which she is constituted as a political subject inculcates desires and dispositions which render her content to perpetuate her own subordination.⁹⁴ On this view, she has been moulded into a subject who would rather comply with her own oppression than press genuinely resistive demands *even if* she had access to the conceptual resources to articulate them. In both cases, this means that the female board member either cannot express what she means to say – the vocabulary required to give conceptual shape to her experience of subordination quite literally absent – or is rendered mute. Either way, her illocutions do not just fail to update the conversational score; she makes no illocutionary act at all. Beyond failing to achieve uptake, she thus suffers what we might call *expressive disablement*.

In contrast to first- and second-order oppressions which describe instances of domination arising from the *contravention* of otherwise acceptable norms and forms of marginalisation arising from the *adherence* to objectionable norms respectively, third-order oppressions are, as Dotson puts it, the result of “*inadequate dominant, shared epistemic resources*”.⁹⁵ To be subject to a third-order oppression is to be disadvantaged by some kind of gap in our collective background frameworks which hinders the very expression of certain discursive moves. This means that while first-order oppressions are distinguished by persistent patterns of illocutionary failure and second-order oppressions by the ways in which marginalised individuals are precluded from updating the discursive scoreboard, third-order oppressions operate by frustrating the very formulation of the claims which would otherwise attempt to do so. To be subject to a third-order oppression is to find oneself unable to form an utterance that could even aspire to update the conversational score.

This construal of third-order oppressions accords with Lukes’ account of what he calls the “three-dimensional view” of power.⁹⁶ In addition to the two dimensions of power already outlined, Lukes argues that power, considered along the third dimension of analysis he introduces, can be thought of as a form of

⁹³ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1994. ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 104

⁹⁴ See Allen, Amy. 2008. *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Ch. 4: Dependency, Subordination, and Recognition: Butler on Subjection. See also Butler, Judith. 1997. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503616295> and Brown, Wendy. 1995. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 64.

⁹⁵ Dotson, 2011, 129.

⁹⁶ Lukes, 2004, 25-9.

influence exerted over the constitution of the very needs, desires, and preferences that inform the policy positions even proposed for inclusion within the political field. As Lukes puts it,

A may exercise power over *B* by getting him [*sic*] to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. Indeed, is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?⁹⁷

As Lukes continues, this reflects the fact that while power undoubtedly manifests in one's control over the outcome of policy conflicts, for one, and in one's control over the range of *possible* policy conflicts, for another, "the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place".⁹⁸ On this picture, power consists in the capacity to secure assent to a given regime in advance of public deliberation, a state of affairs in which resistance is not even possible, let alone effective. In contrast to the way that existing regimes of power often "incorporat[e] ... materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials", Mark Fisher refers to this phenomenon as "*precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations, and hopes" into forms unthreatening to existing regimes of power.⁹⁹

To be subject to a third-order oppression is, as Jennifer Hornsby puts it, to discover that "there aren't any words that can say what [one] mean[s]".¹⁰⁰ This is not, of course, to say that lacking the conceptual vocabulary required to express oneself due to ignorance – as in the attempt to explain a subject one is unfamiliar with – constitutes a third-order oppression. Rather, to be subject to a third-order oppression is to find that the conceptual repertoire we avail ourselves of is itself insufficient, that it does not trace the contours of reality in a way that reflects our experience of it, that we cannot make sense of things in a way intelligible to ourselves or to others. To find oneself under the yoke of a third-order oppression is, as Hornsby continues, to find one's experiences subject to a kind of "ineffability" characterised by the conjunction of two conditions: that, for any given linguistic context, "(i) there is something someone might have meant to say and (ii) no words that she could use would enable her to say that".¹⁰¹ It is just this

⁹⁷ Lukes, 2004, 27.

⁹⁸ Lukes, 2004, 27.

⁹⁹ Fisher, 2009, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Hornsby, 1995, 127.

¹⁰¹ Hornsby, 1995, 134.

expressive disablement, this lack of the conceptual resources to articulate one's experience, which, when the result of ideologically distorted conceptual resources, manifests as an infringement on one's agency. According to Rorty, it is precisely this fear of finding themselves incapable of giving expression to their authentic selves in their own terms that prompts Proust, Nietzsche, and Derrida to develop their own final vocabularies fully adequate to the articulation of their lives without falling into the constraints imposed by the final vocabularies of others.¹⁰²

One of the clearest examples of a third-order oppression is to be found in Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice. Alongside testimonial injustice which describes how subordinated speakers' knowledge claims are prevented from updating the discursive score as they ought, Fricker argues that subordinated knowers must contend with the distinct injustice "of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource".¹⁰³ Hermeneutical injustice thus takes the form of "a lacuna where the name of a distinctive social experience should be", an experience whose absence from our collective lexicon asymmetrically harms the members of a subordinate group.¹⁰⁴

To illustrate the idea, Fricker examines the case of Carmita Wood, a researcher in the department of nuclear physics at Cornell University, and the development of the concept of sexual harassment. According to Susan Brownmiller, author of the memoir from which Fricker draws, Wood was the unwanted recipient of repeated aggressive sexual attention from an eminent physicist in the department, Boyce McDaniel. As Brownmiller puts it,

the stress of the furtive molestations and her efforts to keep the scientist at a distance ... brought on a host of physical symptoms. Wood developed chronic back and neck pains. Her right thumb tingled and grew numb. She requested a transfer to another department, and when it didn't come through, she quit. She walked out the door and went to Florida for some rest and recuperation. Upon her return she applied for unemployment insurance. When the claims investigator asked why she had left her job after eight years, Wood was at a loss to describe the hateful episodes. She was ashamed and embarrassed. Under

¹⁰² See Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Ch. 5: Self-Creation and Affiliation: Proust, Nietzsche, and Heidegger and Ch. 6: From Ironist Theory to Private Allusions: Derrida.

¹⁰³ Fricker, 2007, 155.

¹⁰⁴ Fricker, 2007, 150-1. See also Anderson, Luvell. 2017. 'Hermeneutical Impasses'. *Philosophical Topics* 45 (2): 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics201745211>.

prodding – the blank on the form needed to be filled in – she answered that her reasons had been personal. Her claim for unemployment benefits was denied.¹⁰⁵

It was only after talking with the leader of a seminar on “women and work” that Wood realised that her experience was not unique and, in fact, utterly routine for women in the workplace. Organising a speak-out to protest the issue, Karen Sauvigne, a member of a New York Radical Feminists consciousness-raising group, recounts to Brownmiller that

We were referring to it as “sexual intimidation”, “sexual coercion”, “sexual exploitation on the job”. None of those names seemed quite right. We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviours. Somebody came up with “harassment”. *Sexual harassment!* Instantly we agreed. That’s what it was.¹⁰⁶

Thus was the concept of sexual harassment born.

Over and above the wrong done to her by McDaniel, the key point for Fricker is that Wood was the victim of a specifically epistemic injustice insofar as she was unable to render her experience conceptually intelligible. This injustice manifested in two distinct ways. On the one hand, Wood was denied material support to which she was entitled because she lacked the conceptual resources to communicate her experience to the insurance claims investigator. But on the other hand, Wood was also unable to articulate the nature of her experience to herself, to make sense of the wrong done to her. In both respects, the injustice Wood experienced was the result not of her ignorance of a concept which, had she known of it, would have enabled her to assuage the ineffability of her experience, but of a deficiency in the hermeneutical resources in society at large. The injustice is in this sense a social, collective one since “the blame”, as Hornsby puts it, ought to be placed “on the state of the language”.¹⁰⁷ The specifically epistemic injustice done to Wood was subsequently redressed in the collective coining of the term sexual harassment as it enabled her to make sense of her experience to herself and others.

Third-order oppressions present an insurmountable difficulty for the historical-recollective core of Brandom’s account. For while first- and second-order oppressions both describe different ways in which the discursive contributions of subordinated groups fail to come off, third-order oppressions suppress the

¹⁰⁵ Brownmiller, Susan. 1999. *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution*. New York, NY: The Dial Press. 280.

¹⁰⁶ Brownmiller, 1999, 281.

¹⁰⁷ Hornsby, 1995, 136.

expression of discursive contributions entirely by withholding the conceptual resources appropriate to them. This means that where first- and second-order oppressions impact the structure and distribution of discursive contributions receiving their due, third-order oppressions instead produce patterns of silence – gaps in the history of a concept’s use – where we would otherwise expect them. The problem this raises for Brandom specifically is that eliminating the expressive capacities of subordinated groups entirely deprives them of the ability to participate in the rational reconstruction of experience, of the ability to “giv[e] objective contingency the normative form of necessity”.¹⁰⁸ For if, as Brandom claims, the process of recollective reconstruction involves the retrospective recollection of a concept’s actual use in belief and judgement so as to make progressively more and more explicit the content implicitly governing its employment, then if it turns out that subordinated groups cannot speak, then there simply will not be any concept uses to recollectively rationalise. With third-order oppressions reducing discursive participants to silence, the condition of possibility for the historical-recollective component of Brandom’s account fails to obtain. With no concepts to be retrospectively rationalised in the first place, the hinge on which the genealogical rationalisation of contingent experience into rationally necessary form pivots can no longer support its own argumentative weight.

Where, then, does this leave us? As we’ve seen, despite foregrounding the foundational role that the social and the historical plays in the institution of normative authority and the determination of conceptual content, Brandom’s insensitivity to the dynamics of social and historical reality – their essentially contestatory nature, the way that power systematically distorts the possibilities of discursive practice, the inequalities and forms of domination that structure them – means that the pragmatic grounds on which his account stands crumble under scrutiny. The suggestion that we can be reconciled to the contingencies of our discursive lives by an act of will alone loses credibility because, as Leon Trotsky rightly observes, “it is impossible by a mere individual ... effort to escape from the web of the social lie”.¹⁰⁹ For if our dispositions to go on are partly constituted by the social structures impinging on our discursive practices, then it will take reconciling ourselves to those social structures by eliminating the oppressions currently organising them

¹⁰⁸ Brandom, 2019a, 720.

¹⁰⁹ Wilson, Edmund. 1940. *To the Finland Station*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company. Quote taken from “the first volume of [Trotsky’s] biography of Lenin, published in French in 1936”. Originally found in Srinivasan, Amia. 2020. ‘Radical Externalism’. *The Philosophical Review* 129 (3): 395. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-8311261>.

if we are to give contingency the form of necessity. The conclusion with which we find ourselves is that ameliorating genealogical anxiety demands not *philosophical* but *social* transformation.

4.5 “The Insurrection of Subjugated Knowledges”

Evaluating Brandom’s account against the inequalities, power dynamics, and forms of oppression that actually structure the discursive and institutional landscapes in which we find ourselves reveals it to be seriously inadequate. As we have seen, both the pervasive uptake failures that typically structure the discursive interactions of hierarchically situated agents and the hermeneutical lacunae which deprive subordinated agents and groups of the expressive capacities to retrospectively integrate their experiences into a conceptually articulated rational reconstruction lead to major problems for both the social-recognitive and the historical-recollective components of Brandom’s account. Moreover, what attention Brandom does afford to the demands of nonideal theory fails to regard the recognitive asymmetries he does consider in a manner appropriately sensitive to their essentially social character. No matter how we look at it, what I initially claimed was the most promising *philosophical* response to genealogical anxiety fails to address the social and historical realities with which genealogical anxiety is entwined.

There is, however, a precarious and uncertain route out of this bind, a route that genealogical inquiry itself maps out. One of the key objections to the three-tiered analysis of oppression I have presented is that it seems to make no room for critique or resistance, that the forms of power and subordination it delineates appear all-encompassing. Indeed, the intersecting and overlapping effects of first-, second-, and third-order oppressions appear to eliminate the space for genuinely resistive political agency free from the threat of prefiguration by hegemonic schemas of political possibility. And yet as the history of radical political practice attests, resistance to oppression is as ubiquitous a feature of social life as oppression itself. From the Haitian Revolution to the South African anti-apartheid movement, from the revolts of 1848 to Occupy Wall Street, and from the struggle for women’s suffrage to #MeToo, there are countless instances of concerted political action which aim to overthrow and rectify oppressive social structures. Indeed, that political resistance – even in the face of seemingly inescapable third-order oppressions – occasionally leads to determinate steps towards justice means that there must be, from within the labyrinth of oppressions, the possibility of emancipation. As Foucault (in conversation with Gilles Deleuze) perhaps crudely puts it, “the masses no longer need [the intellectual] to gain knowledge [of their oppression]: they *know* perfectly well, without

illusion; they know far better than he [*sic*] and they are certainly capable of expressing themselves”.¹¹⁰ The problem, he continues, is that “there exists a system of power which blocks, prohibits and invalidates this discourse and this knowledge”.¹¹¹ How that system of power is to be overcome is thus of particular concern.

Why, then, does political resistance appear impossible on the picture outlined thus far? As I see it, the idea that my analysis leaves no room for critique relies on an as yet unacknowledged assumption, an assumption shared with Brandom’s unsuccessful attempt to explicate asymmetric cognitive relations on the model of the master-slave relation. That assumption is that the web of social and historical relations through which recognition and recollection are articulated are, at some basic level, *uniform*. On this picture, social relations are not stratified along axes of class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on, and are hence seen to function homogeneously across social divisions. However, as Foucault argues, to assume a homogenous distribution of the effects of power is to misunderstand the power dynamics typical of class-stratified social systems. For as he notes in his analysis of bourgeois sexual politics for instance, while bourgeois sexuality applies evenly across society as its dominant regime, the very same system of sexuality “does not operate in symmetrical fashion with respect to the social classes, and consequently, ... it does not produce the same effects in them”.¹¹² What functions as a form of “subjugation” for the proletariat is “an arrogant political affirmation” for the bourgeoisie, bourgeois sexuality’s “specific class effects” simultaneously producing the “self-affirmation of one class” and the “enslavement of another”.¹¹³

It is with this class-stratified dynamic in mind that first-, second-, and third-order oppressions ought to be viewed. Yet the fact that both the objection above and Brandom’s account fail to do so indicates that both view the interrelationship between discursive and social relations *from a perspective of dominance*. For while the possibility of critique may appear mysterious for one for whom there is no disparity between the experience of the social world and the perspective on it yielded by the hegemonic discursive regimes it produces, the friction that exists between social reality and its discursive articulation is precisely the condition of possibility of critique. Indeed, as Judith Butler notes, critique emerges from those lacunae in

¹¹⁰ Foucault, Michel, and Gilles Deleuze. 1977. ‘Intellectuals and Power: A Conversation Between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze’. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by Donald F. Bouchard, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 207.

¹¹¹ Foucault and Deleuze, 1977, 207.

¹¹² Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1: An Introduction. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 127.

¹¹³ Foucault, 1978, 127 and 123.

the present epistemological field which “produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability” in the ways that we go on in our everyday lives.¹¹⁴ This means, however, that despite their exclusion from dominant recognitive and recollective discursive structures, subordinated agents are able to attain genuine normative authority and determine novel conceptual contents in and through the very experience of what W. E. B Du Bois calls “double-consciousness”, the experience of being, having, and exhibiting “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one ... body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder”.¹¹⁵ It is just that experience of “two-ness” which enables subordinated agents to navigate and understand the social world from both their own perspective and the perspective of the hegemonic conceptual regimes produced by the social structures that dominate them.¹¹⁶ In contrast to the perspective of dominance (for which the social world is just that revealed through its own conceptual matrix), this is what makes critique possible. Indeed, as the case of Carmita Wood demonstrates, communities of resistance are frequently able to formulate resistive demands in their own terms by forming reciprocal recognitive networks and retrospective reconstructions which stand independent of the social and discursive relations which constitute the dominant *qua* dominant and the subordinate *qua* subordinate.¹¹⁷ The experiences of the subordinate can in this way take conceptual form even though they remain excluded from dominant conceptual formations.

It may be replied at this point that Brandom’s account of forgiveness serves to allay this problem. For as outlined in Section 3.4.2.3, forgiveness governs how we are to rationalise just those episodes of concept use whose implicit content our linguistic ancestors failed to make fully explicit. But just like any other speech act – and all action in general – undertaking to forgive our ancestors can fail to come off for any number of reasons. I mean to complete the race, but tire and drop out. I mean to promise you to bring the wine, but you take me to jest and so don’t hold me to it. I mean to rationalise a course of experience, but cannot find the Ariadne’s thread of concept applications according to which it figures as an expressively progressive episode. It may thus be claimed that just because the content implicit in the experiences of the

¹¹⁴ Butler, Judith. 2002. “What Is Critique?” An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue’. In *The Political*, edited by David Ingram. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 215.

¹¹⁵ Du Bois, W. E. B. 2009. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited by Brent Hayes Edwards. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 8.

¹¹⁶ Du Bois, 2009, 8.

¹¹⁷ For further discussion of the radical potential of consciousness raising, see Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York, NY: Continuum.

subordinate may not have been made explicit, that does not mean that it is not there *to be made* explicit. Rather, it may simply be the case that one's attempt at doing so was unsuccessful, and hence calls for confession. Indeed, the fact that we will inevitably fail to forgive our ancestors on occasion is precisely why the norm of recollection is trust; just as we forgive our ancestors for failing to make the conceptual content of their experiences fully explicit, so we entreat our descendants to forgive us.

This strategy is, however, unavailable to Brandom. For the issue that emerges even in the case of first-order oppressions is that instances of discursive practice must first be designated *as* discursive if they are to be made available for inclusion in a rational reconstruction. The problem is that the license to designate the discursive *qua* discursive, to update the discursive score on what counts as discursive or not, is precisely what subordinated speakers are deprived of. Indeed, prefiguring the limits of possible discourse within an amenable range is the very ideological distortion which makes asymmetric recognition, uptake failure, and expressive disablement possible and is hence partly *constitutive* of the oppression of subordinated speakers. This means that even if we adopt a forgiving recognitive attitude towards the prejudices, language game switching, and conceptual lacunae of our discursive ancestors, subordinated speakers are still actively precluded from view on Brandom's picture. Indeed, this explains both why the social world appears free of concrete social divisions for Brandom and why the perspective of dominance from which his argument proceeds is simply assumed as given.

How, then, are we to proceed? For if it turns out that subordinated communities are structurally precluded from participating in the rational reconstruction of our collective conceptual resources, then the conceptual lacunae that result will simply reproduce the conditions of their continued marginalisation. How are we to halt the cycle of asymmetric recognition, uptake failure, and expressive disablement?

One of the mantras that Brandom repeats throughout the exposition of his account is that rational reconstruction is the means by which we transform a past into a history. It is how we give contingency the rational form of necessity and make something that merely happens into something done. Indeed, as seen in Section 2.7, rational reconstruction is precisely what provides the normative grounding for problematising genealogy's destabilisation of the seemingly given field of discursive intelligibility. What Brandom fails to realise, however, is that retrospective recollective rational reconstruction is itself reciprocally dependent upon the possibility of critical interrogation since what makes concept uses available for integration into a

rational reconstruction in the first place is problematising genealogy's defamiliarisation of our present sense of discursive possibility, the very sense that rationalising genealogy seeks to express.

It is in the pursuit of such defamiliarisation that genealogical inquiry – and problematising genealogy in particular – comes into its own. For as Foucault puts it, the purpose of genealogical critique is to unearth those “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematisations”, their meanings overwritten and forgotten in the bricolage of historical change.¹¹⁸ Indeed, discussing the rationale behind supplementing the so-called archaeologies of his early work with the genealogies of his middle and late periods, Foucault argues that

genealogy is ... [an] attempt to desubjugate historical knowledges, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse. ... To put it in a nutshell: Archaeology is the method specific to the analysis of local discursivities, and genealogy is the tactic which, once it has described these local discursivities, brings into play the desubjugated knowledges that have been released from them.¹¹⁹

As the title of this section suggests, genealogical critique should be thought of, Foucault argues, as an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”, as a means of reactivating “a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual” so that they might be reintroduced to the discursive field, the parts of the world they light up once again made available for contestation.¹²⁰ As José Medina puts it,

Subjugated knowledges remain invisible to mainstream perspectives; they have a precarious subterranean existence that renders them unnoticed by most people and impossible to detect by those whose perspective has already internalised certain epistemic exclusions. And with the invisibility of subjugated knowledges, certain possibilities for resistance and subversion go unnoticed. The critical and emancipatory potential of Foucaultian [*sic*] genealogy resides in challenging established practices of remembering and forgetting by excavating subjugated bodies of experiences and memories, bringing to the fore the perspectives that culturally hegemonic practices have foreclosed.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Foucault, Michel. 2003. *“Society Must Be Defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey. New York, NY: Picador. 7.

¹¹⁹ Foucault, 2003, 10-11. See also Tiisala, Tuomo. 2015. ‘Keeping It Implicit: A Defense of Foucault’s Archaeology of Knowledge’. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1 (4): 653–73. <https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2015.29>.

¹²⁰ Foucault, 2003, 7. See also Foucault, 2003, 10-1.

¹²¹ Medina, José. 2011. ‘Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction, and *Guerrilla* Pluralism?’. *Foucault Studies*. 11. <https://doi.org/10.22439/fs.v0i12.3335>.

Foucault utilises genealogical inquiry to bring hidden possibilities for critique, possibilities invisible from a perspective of dominance, to the surface. By conducting what Foucault calls “a meticulous rediscovery of struggles and the raw memory of fights”, we become able to “make use of that knowledge in contemporary tactics”.¹²² Making what hitherto appeared to be the conceptually unarticulated experience of subordinated groups available for incorporation into a rational reconstruction must therefore not merely transform a past into a history, but into a *counter* history. For in so doing, rational reconstruction provides a progressively expressive narrative that de-centres the ruling conceptual hegemony in terms of which existing expressive exclusions are determined, a de-marginalisation that radically upends what it is possible to regard as conceptually articulable. On this view, rational reconstruction becomes a way of generating what Medina calls “resistant imaginations”, conceptions of discursive possibility that reach beyond the present limits of intelligibility through the rediscovery and rehabilitation of alternative ways of going on.¹²³

The process of developing such counter histories serves as an antidote to the ideological misrepresentation of the fixity of the social, the root error which sends us down the path towards genealogical anxiety in the first place. This is because recovering previously subjugated conceptual histories makes a newly expanded set of concept uses available for incorporation into our rational reconstructions and, as Linda Zerilli articulates it, thereby “expands our sense of what we can communicate”.¹²⁴ Such counter historical reconstruction also highlights why practices of aesthetic, ethical, and political experimentation – i.e., resistive conceptual regimes independent of existing forms of intelligibility – are such common themes in radical political discourse.¹²⁵ For since adopting the conceptual apparatuses that emerge

¹²² Foucault, 2003, 8.

¹²³ Medina, José. 2013. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. Ch. 6: Resistant Imaginations and Radical Solidarity.

¹²⁴ Zerilli, Linda M. G. 2005. *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 162.

¹²⁵ For an overview of the philosophical and political implications of such forms of experimentation, see Lorenzini, Daniele, and Tuomo Tiisala. 2024. ‘The Architectonic of Foucault’s Critique’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 32 (1): 114–29. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12877>; Lorenzini, Daniele. 2023. *The Force of Truth: Critique, Genealogy, and Truth-Telling in Michel Foucault*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press; Srinivasan, Amia. 2019. ‘Genealogy, Epistemology and Worldmaking’. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119 (2): §VII. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/a0z009>; Laboria Cuboniks. 2018. *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation*. London, UK: Verso; Hester, Helen. 2018. *Xenofeminism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press; Firestone, Shulamith. 2015. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. London, UK: Verso; Lewis, Sophie. 2021. *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family*. London: Verso; Lewis, Sophie. 2022. *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation*. London, UK: Verso; Foucault, Michel. 1984c. ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books. 46; Foucault, Michel. 1984d. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure. Translated by Robert Hurley. London, UK: Viking. 8-9; Le Guin, Ursula K. 1974. *The Dispossessed*. London, UK: Gollancz; Adorno, Theodor W. 1991. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. Edited by J. M.

from dominant discursive relations risks simply reinscribing dominant regimes of intelligibility, proceeding without normative warrant is the only way to augment the field of political possibility.¹²⁶ Indeed, were the warrant of new forms of thought, agency, or subjectivity – either individual or collective – determinable ahead of time, then they wouldn't be genuinely experimental at all, the project of developing novel regimes of intelligibility turning out to have been caught within the terms of existing ones all along.

I bring this chapter to a close by returning our attention to the change of philosophical posture with which we began. As outlined in Section 4.1 the motivation behind adopting a diagnostic posture towards genealogical anxiety was to examine its conditions of possibility. In so doing, I explicated the ideological character of two-stage metasemantic strategies and they obfuscate the contingent social bases of discursive practice. In representing the meanings of our terms as given, the social conditions structuring our contingent forms of life ossify into the putatively necessary preconditions of linguistic competence as such, an illusion that the friction between mind and world cannot but undercut. We also examined the implications of omitting the social bases of discursive practice from analysis. I argued that if Brandom's philosophical attempt to reconcile us to contingency is to be successful, then it requires social theoretic supplementation. The problem, however, is that such supplementation creates disastrous tensions in the philosophical account itself. Genealogical anxiety is in this sense an expression of the tension between a particular ideologically motivated expectation of necessity and the contingent social reality it comes up against. Insofar as remedying that ideological expectation requires *political* intervention, this means that genealogical anxiety is *philosophically* intractable. By both diagnosing the philosophical and social conditions from which genealogical anxiety emerges and investigating the obstacles facing attempts to *resolve* it, we are now primed to see how it might be *dissolved*. Accomplishing that objective is the task to which we now turn.

Bernstein. London, UK: Routledge; Benjamin, Walter. 1997. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. Translated by Harry Zohn. London, UK: Verso; Lorde, Audre. 1984. 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury'. In *Sister Outsider*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

¹²⁶ See Srinivasan, Amia. 2022. 'What Should Feminist Philosophy Be? An Interview with Amia Srinivasan'. *Radical Philosophy* 2 (12): 61.

5 Modernity, Alienation, and the Politics of the Space of Reasons

5.1 Introduction

The final part of my argument requires embarking on the necessarily more speculative task of connecting genealogical anxiety's intractability to a Kantian story about the metaphysics of normativity. That story involves sketching an admittedly contentious picture of the distinction between the normative structure of antiquity and the normative structure of modernity. As I will show, it is on the back of that story that the contingency of our beliefs, concepts, and practices becomes a problem of central philosophical concern and which grips us with a felt urgency. In retelling this story, my objective is to make salient the social and historical conditions under which it becomes intelligible to be genealogically anxious towards the contingency of our own discursive practices.¹

The idea underpinning my argument is that under the normative conditions of modernity, genealogical anxiety can be thought of as a distinctive form of *normative alienation*. For if, in accordance with a naturalistic metaphysics appropriate to modernity, it is we who bring norms and meaning into the world, then the rational status of those norms and meanings cannot but be vulnerable to genealogical destabilisation. This means that although genealogical anxiety has been an animating force in philosophy as far back as the Pre-Socratics, anxiety regarding the status of the *norms* governing our discursive lives is a

¹ An important qualification to be made here is that the Kantian story retailed in this chapter is a specifically Korsgaardian one. It is therefore partial and open to contestation. Nevertheless, just as the process of rational reconstruction involves the selective identification of a tradition that makes some implicit content progressively more explicit, the narrative I present should be understood as an attempt to discern, from all of the possible conceptual traditions that could be discerned, an expressively progressive Ariadne's thread that makes some implicit feature of the transition to modernity explicit.

distinctively modern phenomenon.² Yet that is not all. For since, as elaborated in Section 4.3, the structures of discursive normativity are inextricably entwined with the social structures in which they figure, and since the transition to modernity was as much an institutional transformation as it was a philosophical one, this means that genealogical anxiety ought to be considered, first and foremost, as an expression of the social pathologies that alienate us from the norms to which we are subject. With what I think is the most promising philosophical attempt to meet this challenge failing to survive contact with social reality, this suggests that genealogical anxiety is in fact as essential a feature of modernity as the disenchantment of the natural world, the long shadow the Kantian Enlightenment casts.

In what follows, I shall first argue that normative alienation is made possible by the normative space mapped out by Kant's metanormative constructivism. I will then show that the conditions from which normative alienation arises are at root social. Finally, in showing genealogical anxiety to be but an alienated expression of those social conditions, I shall complete the overarching argument of this thesis: that our experience of genealogical anxiety is not a problem to be *resolved*, but *dissolved*.

5.2 The Normative Structure of Modernity

Our just-so story about the distinction between the normative structure of antiquity and the normative structure of modernity begins with an account of their respective metaphysics. Christine Korsgaard articulates the basic idea in the preface to *The Sources of Normativity*.³ As she argues, the transition to modernity marks a shift in the metaphysics of form and matter, value and fact. For the ancients, “value was more real

² For an overview of genealogy in the Ancient world, see Srinivasan, Amia. 2023. ‘Genealogy and the Ancients’. Presented at The Jacobsen Lecture, University College London, May 11. <https://philosophy.sas.ac.uk/news-events/events/jacobsen-lecture-2023-amia-srinivasan-genealogy-ancients>.

³ It's worth noting that Korsgaard's interpretation of the normative metaphysics of modernity is contentious, as is her understanding of Kant's role in the constitution of modernity. For alternative interpretations of the normative structure of modernity, see Alvarez, Maria, and Aaron Ridley. 2007. ‘The Concept of Moral Obligation: Anscombe *contra* Korsgaard’. *Philosophy* 82 (4): 543–52. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819107000149>; Habermas, Jürgen. 1990. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press; and Horkheimer, Max. 1996. ‘Reason against Itself: Some Remarks on Enlightenment’. In *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, edited by James Schmidt. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. For an overview of competing interpretations of Kant's contribution to the development of modernity, see Taylor, Charles. 1992b. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Esp. Part I: Identity and the Good and Moriarty, Michael. 2019. ‘Pascal's Modernity’. *The Seventeenth Century* 34 (2): 209–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268117X.2017.1390493>. See also Kant, Immanuel. 1996. ‘An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?’ In *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, edited by James Schmidt. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

than experienced fact, indeed that the real world is, in a way, value itself".⁴ This is because, as Plato and Aristotle each contend in their own way, the world is

a world of things that are trying to be much better than they are, and that really are much better than they seem. ... Plato believed that the essence of a thing is the form in which it participates. A thing's true nature and its perfect nature are one and the same. Form, which is value, is more real than the things which appear to us to participate in but fall short of it. Aristotle believed that the *actuality* of a thing is its form, which makes it possible for the thing to do what it does and therefore to be what it is. ... Form is more real than the matter, since matter is just the potential for form, the possibility of acting in a certain way. ... For Plato and Aristotle, being guided by value is a matter of being guided by the way things ultimately *are*.⁵

This picture simply will not do for us moderns. For us, as John McDowell argues, the natural world has been "empt[ied] ... of meaning" to one degree or another.⁶ This means, as Korsgaard continues, that "the world is no longer first and foremost form. It is *matter*. ... The real is no longer the good. For us, reality is something *hard*, something which resists reason and value".⁷ For Korsgaard, the consequence of this disenchantment is that "if the real and the good are no longer one, value must find its way into the world somehow. Form must be imposed on the world of matter".⁸ One of the central questions of modern philosophy thus becomes, for Korsgaard, whether value actually can be brought into the world – and, if so, how.⁹

For Kant and the theorists of modernity such as Hegel and Nietzsche who followed him, it is we who bring value into the world in one way or another. The insight at the heart of Kant's critical project is that the binding force of (legitimately instituted) norms – linguistic, rational, and moral – is constituted in and through the normal operation of practical reason. On this picture, normativity gets into the world, as seen in Section 3.4.1.1, in and through the normal process of reflection on it. This is because our capacity

⁴ Korsgaard, Christine M. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2.

⁵ Korsgaard, 1996, 2.

⁶ McDowell, John. 1996. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 71.

⁷ Korsgaard, 1996, 4.

⁸ Korsgaard, 1996, 5.

⁹ There are, of course, distinctively modern thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty who argue that value is experienced as given and as given in experience. See Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1964. 'The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences'. In *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, edited and translated by James M. Edie. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

for reflection is contingent upon the possibility of norm-governed conduct, the very act of considering the bindingness of the norms of practical reason thereby presupposing, on pain of inconsistency, their validity.

Yet precisely because the authority of our normative representations depends on our practical reason, we too hold a reciprocal authority over *what* we are committed to, an authority Hegel refers to under the rubric of the “right of knowledge” (*PR_H* §117). The right of knowledge expresses the idea that how we take the world to be constrains the circumstances under which we can be held responsible for how it really is. This articulates the idea that the correctness or incorrectness of a performance is, as Robert Brandom puts it, “something normatively imputable to the agent” only if they are cognisant of its inferential or causal consequences.¹⁰ That our conduct ought not to be assessed against norms about which we could not have known (or could not be expected to infer from those we do) is the background narrative to which Hegel’s recognitive institution of normative authority is a socialised response. Indeed, the realisation that the bindingness of genuinely authoritative rational norms is dependent on the operation of practical reason is, as Brandom puts it, “partially constitutive of modernity”.¹¹

This stands in marked contrast to the normative structure of antiquity. With value more real than the empirical world itself, whether or not we know the Good or the Right is simply immaterial to the question of its authority; the question simply fails to arise for the same reason it does not make sense to question the normative authority of the second law of thermodynamics. The fact that there may be a discrepancy between what we think we are committed to and what we are actually committed to is precisely what constitutes the tragic character of antiquity.

That normative authority is constrained by our knowledge marks, for Brandom, “a decisive advance in our practical and theoretical understanding of normativity and agency”.¹² For in articulating the manner in which genuinely binding rational norms are dependent for their legitimacy upon our attitudes – both implicit and explicit – towards them, our reflective endorsement constrains legitimate attributions of responsibility, a bulwark against the full range of unforeseeable consequences for which we might otherwise be held accountable. The rub, however, is that if we are the originators of value, form, and meaning, if, that is, the normative depends on the exercise of practical reason for its authority, then normative authority turns

¹⁰ Brandom, Robert. 2019a. *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel's Phenomenology*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 387.

¹¹ Brandom, 2019a, 454.

¹² Brandom, 2019a, 477.

out not to be unconditional, necessary, or universal, but sensitive to the contingencies which make us the kinds of agents we are and constitute our normative lives. How we ought to make sense of the genuine authority of norms thus becomes the issue around which Kant's critical project revolves.

5.3 Two Views of Kantian Constructivism

The underlying concern motivating Kant's critical project is standardly understood to relate to the *metaphysics* of normativity.¹³ As the story goes, Kant's overarching objective – and the objective of metanormative constructivism in general – is to present an account of norms which is, as James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer put it, “maximally free of any controversial metaphysical suppositions”.¹⁴ With the scientific revolution prompting a deep suspicion of explanations which rely on a non-naturalistic metaphysics, the philosophy of the Enlightenment was a response to a demand for an account of normative authority which refrained from making substantive metaphysical assumptions about the kinds of entities populating the world. Where the order of the day had formerly been the search for Cartesian certainty, Kant's project is instead driven by what Brandom calls a deep “disenchantment” with forms of normative authority unable to withstand rational scrutiny, a venture for which metaphysically naturalistic scientific inquiry is the measure.¹⁵

The issue these Enlightenment demands present, however, is that it is not at all clear what place there is for norms within the space demarcated by the scientific worldview. Scientific inquiry, ostensibly the source of the best explanations of empirical reality, does not yield norms, nor does it permit their universal binding authority given the contingency of the empirical reality it explains. Kant's metanormative constructivism is thus commonly understood as a way of realising the genuinely binding rational force of

¹³ See, for instance, Gibbard, Allan. 1999. ‘Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard's Kantian Lectures’. *Ethics* 110 (1): 140–64. <https://doi.org/10.1086/233207>; Tiffany, Evan. 2006. ‘How Kantian Must Kantian Constructivists Be?’ *Inquiry* 49 (6): 524–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00201740601016205>; and O'Neill, Onora. 2015. *Constructing Authorities: Reason, Politics, and Interpretation in Kant's Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 3–4.

¹⁴ Lenman, James, and Yonatan Shemmer. 2012. ‘Introduction’. In *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, edited by James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199609833.003.0001>.

¹⁵ Brandom, Robert. 2012. ‘Reason, Genealogy, and the Hermeneutics of Magnanimity’. Presented at the UC Berkeley Graduate Council Lectures, Berkeley, CA, November 12. https://sites.pitt.edu/~rbrandom/Texts/Reason_Genealogy_and_the_Hermeneutics_of.pdf. 1 (published in German as Brandom, Robert. 2015. ‘Den Abgrund reflektieren: Vernunft, Genealogie und die Hermeneutik des Edelmutts’. *WestEnd: Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, no. 1: 3–26).

norms without, as McDowell puts it, “find[ing] a spookiness in norms if they are conceived platonistically” and hence of retaining, as Jack Samuel puts it, “universality without metaphysical baggage”.¹⁶ Indeed, David Enoch, summarising the position, contends that

Many people are suspicious about more robust, non-procedural forms of metanormative realism. They think that there are serious metaphysical and epistemological worries (and perhaps others as well) that make such realism highly implausible. Nevertheless, going shamelessly anti-realist also has problems. We seem to be rather strongly committed, for instance, to there being correct and incorrect ways of answering moral (and more generally normative) questions, and moreover our moral (and more generally normative) discourse purports to be rather strongly objective. Constructivism may be thought of as a way of securing goods realism (purportedly) delivers, for a more attractive price.¹⁷

On this interpretation, the problem to which Kant’s metanormative constructivism is putatively an answer is what Huw Price calls the “placement problem”, the idea that if we are committed to the idea of normative propositions having truth-values, then we must specify their “truth-makers”, viz. the worldly facts that determine the truth-values of whichever propositions involve reference to them.¹⁸ The issue is that normative propositions do not, at least in any straightforward sense, appear to have truth-makers. For while empirical propositions are made true or false in virtue of facts about objects in the world, their properties, and the relations they bear to other objects, norms exhibit, according to J. L. Mackie, a distinctive “queerness” insofar as they appear to be “entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe”.¹⁹ With it unclear what normative entities are, how they constitute normative facts, and how normative propositions relate to them, the factivity, and hence truth-aptness, of normative language is seriously threatened. On this metaphysical reading, Kant’s objective is

¹⁶ McDowell, 1996, 94 and Samuel, Jack. 2022. ‘Toward a Post-Kantian Constructivism’. *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 9 (53): 1450. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.3116>.

¹⁷ Enoch, David. 2009. ‘Can There Be a Global, Interesting, Coherent Constructivism about Practical Reason?’ *Philosophical Explorations* 12 (3): 319–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13869790903067683>. 324. Enoch himself argues that the constructivist goal of founding determinate moral demands on an account of practical reason alone ultimately fails because contending that we have reason to act in such and such ways just in virtue of what is constitutive of being an agent assumes that we have reason to be an agent at all, the force of which is precisely the matter that the constructivist is seeking to establish. See Enoch, David. 2006. ‘Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won’t Come from What Is Constitutive of Action’. *The Philosophical Review* 115 (2): 185–7. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2005-014>.

¹⁸ Price, Huw. 2013. *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 5. See also De Caro, Mario. 2023. ‘Between the Placement Problem and the Reconciliation Problem. Philosophical Naturalism Today’. *Topoi* 42 (3): 675–82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-023-09913-6>.

¹⁹ Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. London, UK: Penguin. 38.

thus to provide an account of normative language while avoiding commitment to a metaphysical picture that renders it mysterious. On this picture, while Kant may concur with Mackie in rejecting accounts that imply any metaphysical queerness, he refuses to bite the sceptical bullet that Mackie does in his presentation of the moral error theory.

The answer that Kant provides to the placement problem is little short of revolutionary. Rather than presenting an account of how we come to be bound by the elements of the normative realm by gaining *external* epistemological access to their valid demands over our conduct, Kant locates the source of normative authority *in* the foundational nature of practical reason, in what it is to be an agent at all. This strategy is simultaneously metaphysically deflationary and able to retain the unconditionality constitutive of normative authority insofar as the force of norms is instituted of a piece with the minimal cognitive capacities required to represent them in judgement in the first place. This means that the norms we are subject to are not mysteriously mind-independent in a way incompatible with the scientific worldview (since they are instituted in and through our exercise of thought and agency) yet remain genuinely binding (since their authority is a product of the very capacities we avail ourselves of in reflecting on their authority).

The overriding problem with this metaphysical interpretation of Kant's project is that it is – perhaps ironically – subject to a kind of genealogical debunking by metanormative realists. Discussing ethical norms specifically, Russ Shafer-Landau argues that constructivism cannot be explanatorily basic because “our deepest settled convictions about core cases and principles must serve as constraints on moral theorising”.²⁰ For if a process of practical reasoning yielded a moral theory which justified, say, killing the innocent, we would rightly reject it as incorrect. Indeed, we are not obliged to accept the results of a constructivist procedure against our deepest settled convictions because our deepest convictions serve as the very standards (because constituents of our background frameworks) against which the plausibility of a moral theory is assessed. This process of balancing our convictions with the results of philosophical argumentation is just what John Rawls calls “reflective equilibrium”.²¹ If, however, we implicitly hold criteria constraining the acceptable results of practical reason's construction of moral principles, then those criteria “either ... are moralised or they are not”.²² If they are, then, according to Joseph Raz, constructivism “yields results

²⁰ Shafer-Landau, Russ. 2003. *Moral Realism: A Defence*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 42.

²¹ Rawls, John. 1999. *A Theory of Justice*. Revised edition. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. §9.

²² Shafer-Landau, 2003, 42.

only by presupposing moral views which can only be established independently of it”, the consequence being that it tacitly recognises moral principles explanatorily prior to the constructivist procedure, which is just to endorse some kind of moral realism.²³ But if they are not, then, as Shafer-Landau puts it, “there is no reason to expect that the principles that emerge from such a construction process will capture our deepest ethical convictions” because, given the contingent intuitions that beings like us happen to have in the circumstances we happen to inhabit, we seem to be committed to granting greater confidence to the results of the constructivist procedure than to the pre-reflective intuitions constraining it.²⁴ Either way, understanding constructivism as a way of respecting a metaphysically appealing naturalism about normativity leads to serious problems.

There is, however, another way of understanding the problem motivating Kant’s project, one which effectively sidesteps this conundrum. Understood as a project in the metaphysics of normativity, Kant’s metanormative constructivism appears as a new answer to an old question because it implicitly retains a pre-Kantian conception of the success conditions that any adequate account of normative authority must meet. For Descartes, Locke, and Spinoza, the question of normative authority is an essentially *epistemological* issue. The puzzle requiring solution is how to get a grip on the mind-independent norms governing our conduct so that we might bring our thought and action into accord with their dictates. Since their authority obtains regardless of our grasp of them, we must find out which norms we are subject to and what they oblige of us if we are to think and act correctly. On this interpretation, Kant’s innovation is to present a procedure – the Categorical Imperative – by which we can retain the binding authority of norms within the constraints of the parsimonious metaphysical picture imposed by the Enlightenment’s scientific explanatory minimalism. Nevertheless, the motivating problem remains the same: how do we gain epistemic access to the norms governing our conduct?

If we are to appreciate the truly revolutionary extent of Kant’s inauguration of modernity, then we must reappraise the nature of the problem to which his constructivism is a response. In contrast to the metaphysical interpretation, Korsgaard understands Kant’s project not as an answer to the question of how

²³ Raz, Joseph. 2003. ‘Numbers, With and Without Contractualism’. *Ratio* 16 (4): 358.

<https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1467-9329.2003.00228.x>. See also Timmons, Mark. 2003. ‘The Limits of Moral Constructivism’. *Ratio* 16 (4): §3. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1467-9329.2003.00230.x> and Rawls, John. 2000. *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. Edited by Barbara Herman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 274.

²⁴ Shafer-Landau, 2003, 42.

we get a grip on the norms to which we are subject, but to the question of *how norms get a grip on us*. For Korsgaard, the question Kant seeks to answer is not whether or not normative entities can be accounted for within the naturalistic metaphysics of the scientific worldview, but rather how and why they serve as reasons in and for action, how they are related to the will if they are to be motivating over action, how they become reasons *for us* instead of things “we’ve spotted . . ., as it were, wafting by”.²⁵ For Korsgaard, the concern to avoid the supposed queerness of norms simply does not feature as a desideratum. Indeed, responding to Mackie directly, Korsgaard states that “of course” norms are

queer sorts of entities, and that knowing them isn’t like anything else. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t exist. John Mackie must have been alone in his room with the Scientific World View when he wrote those words. For it is the most familiar fact of human life that the world contains entities that can tell us what to do and make us do it. They are people, and the other animals.²⁶

On this interpretation, Kant is not concerned with the metaphysical status of the normative, nor with retaining the truth-aptness of normative language within an anti-realist metanormative theory. Instead, Kant’s concern is to assuage what Samuel calls our “fear of *normative alienation*”, the fear that the normative has nothing to do with us, that its prescriptions are not addressed to those over whom it claims rational motivating authority.²⁷ If, however, we are to understand the idea of normative alienation and how Kant’s constructivist picture sets out to ameliorate it, we must first turn to another central component of Kant’s account of practical reason.

The hinge on which Korsgaard’s interpretation pivots is Kant’s account of *autonomy*.²⁸ For Kant, autonomy is the link between universally applicable, genuinely binding rational norms and the nature of intentional agency. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that “the moral law expresses nothing other than the

²⁵ Korsgaard, 1996, 44.

²⁶ Korsgaard, 1996, 166.

²⁷ Samuel, 2022, 1454. Addressing this fear will be of particular importance for those who find Thomas Scanlon’s contention that normative properties *just are* reasons to undertake the courses of action in which they figure unsatisfactory. See Scanlon, Thomas. 2014. *Being Realistic about Reasons*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 44.

²⁸ For additional analysis of Kant’s account of autonomy, see Reath, Andrews. 2006. *Agency and Autonomy in Kant’s Moral Theory: Selected Essays*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; O’Neill, Onora. 2003. ‘Autonomy: The Emperor’s New Clothes’. *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 77* (1): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8349.00100>; O’Shea, Tom. 2015. ‘A Law of One’s Own: Self-Legislation and Radical Kantian Constructivism’. *European Journal of Philosophy* 23 (4): 1153–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12044>; Sensen, Oliver, ed. 2012. *Kant on Moral Autonomy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511792489>.

autonomy of pure practical reason”.²⁹ As Korsgaard understands it, to act autonomously is to act in accordance, i.e., to align one’s will, with the dictates of the rules one imposes on oneself because they are recognised, via reflection on the universalisation procedure encoded in the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, as universally authoritative. To act autonomously is to be constrained by norms ‘from the inside’, because recognised as authoritative, rather than constrained by norms submitted to. Since moral norms must have unconditional authority if they are to be genuinely moral, and since the only unconditionally authoritative norms are those grounded in the nature of practical reason itself, moral norms are those reasons for action derived from the self-imposition of those rules originating in the nature of practical reason as such. This means that to represent a norm is to implicitly acknowledge the authority of the norms governing representation, the reflective recognition of which commits one to substantive forms of discursive conduct. Norms get a grip on us, for Kant, not just because we impose them on ourselves, but because the very representation of a norm of conduct as something to endorse or reject is to tacitly recognise the authority of practical reason as we have no choice but to rely on it in the act of representation. According to Brandom, that we are committed to certain norms just in the normal process of cognition is what undergirds “Kant’s ... revolutionary appreciation of the essentially *normative* character of discursive intentionality”.³⁰

5.4 Alienation from Kant to Hegel to Marx

The idea that normative authority is a function of a norm’s autonomous self-imposition over our conduct sets the scene for the next stage of my argument. For although the institution of a norm’s *genuinely* binding rational authority may depend on our attribution of authority to it, it is, as Korsgaard might put it, a most familiar fact of human life that we find ourselves subject to a raft of norms whose authority we do *not* endorse yet by whose prescriptions – either of our own volition or under coercion – we nevertheless abide. Think, for instance, of the feminist who deems marriage a tool of patriarchal control yet chooses to marry, of the class-conscious worker who deems the wage-relation to be inherently exploitative yet sells their labour to the capitalist, or even of the schoolchild who deems the wearing of their uniform arbitrary yet dons the

²⁹ Kant, Immanuel. 2015. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Edited and translated by Mary Gregor. Revised edition. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 5:33.

³⁰ Brandom, 2019a, 9. See also Brandom, 2019a, 67-8.

prescribed blazer and tie. In each case, the normative demand at stake does not survive reflection yet continues to motivate adherence due to the structure of the normative landscape in which it is situated.

The deep issue this raises is that while there may be a range of norms whose authority, legitimate or not, we decline to endorse, there is a very real sense in which those unendorsed norms are nonetheless the products of our agency. For although the *legitimacy* of their authority requires either implicit or explicit endorsement, norms are, as Kant himself contends, brought into the world as a function of our practical reason. We thus find ourselves facing a situation in which it is possible to institute norms that exert determinate force over our conduct while simultaneously refusing to endorse them. For Rahel Jaeggi, this is precisely the tension in which alienation consists. As she puts it, to experience alienation is to find oneself in

a world that is not one's own, which is to say, a world in which one is not 'at home' and over which one can have no influence. The alienated subject becomes a stranger to itself; it no longer experiences itself as an 'actively effective subject' but a 'passive object' at the mercy of unknown forces. One can speak of alienation 'wherever individuals do not find themselves in their own actions' or wherever we cannot be master over the being that we ourselves are³¹

On this picture, alienation is, as Jaeggi variously puts it, a failure to “make one's own”, “appropriate”, or “identify with” the world, our activity, or ourselves since “what is alienated ... is something that has been *made* but that appears as *given*”.³² Normative alienation is duly the failure to make one's own, appropriate, or identify with the normative landscape. This means that in contrast to autonomy, which consists in freely imposing self-legislated rules over our conduct, normative alienation consists in experiencing the norms to which we are subject as external impositions over which we have no agency, as an alien force governing our lives, as an obstacle to realising, as Isaiah Berlin puts it, our wish to “be [our] own master”.³³ Yet whether we realise it or not, since we are the ultimate source of the norms to which we are subject, this means that normative alienation is not merely the failure or inability to identify with just any norms, but rather with

³¹ Jaeggi, Rahel. 2014. *Alienation*. Edited by Frederick Neuhouser. Translated by Frederick Neuhouser and Alan E. Smith. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 3.

³² Jaeggi, 2014, 37-40 and 15. Cf. the discussion of the ideological representation of contingency and necessity in Section 4.2.2.

³³ Berlin, Isaiah. 2002. “Two Concepts of Liberty”. In *Liberty*, edited by Henry Hardy, 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 178. <https://doi.org/10.1093/019924989X.003.0004>.

norms that *we ourselves have created*. As Alasdair MacIntyre claims, the alienated individual is hence “a stranger in the world that he [*sic*] himself has made”.³⁴

While it is Kant who lays the groundwork for thinking of genealogical anxiety as a kind of alienation, it is Marx (under the influence of Hegel) who provides us with the resources to cash the idea out fully. In order to see what Marx brings to the table however, we must first understand the limitations of Kant’s metanormative constructivism as a means of assuaging the threat of normative alienation.

As examined in Section 3.4.1.1, the institution of determinately authoritative norms is an individual affair for Kant. Through the exercise of reflection, a capacity he thinks essential to what it is to be a rational agent at all, we can examine our dispositions to assent from the critical distance required to ask whether or not we actually *ought* to assent. Genuinely binding rational norms are motivating over our conduct just in case we freely elect to impose them on ourselves upon recognising their universal validity, that is, upon recognising that that we, and hence all, ought to assent to them.

There are two key inadequacies with Kant’s picture. The first relates to the fact that Kant relies on substantive assumptions about what we and our cognitions are like. On this picture, our capacity for reflection as essentially self-conscious beings is definitional of what it is to be the kinds of beings we are, “a reflection”, as Anil Gomes puts it, “of the fact that we are not just animals”.³⁵ The problem is that this ultimately renders the grounds of our capacity for reflection mysterious. For while Kant can present an argument, one we might even find convincing, about why regarding ourselves as self-conscious is a condition on regarding our discursive practices as able to get the right kind of practical purchase on the world, the assertion that we actually *are* self-conscious effectively becomes, in Gomes’ idiom, an article of “faith”.³⁶ This means that while we must presuppose that we are self-conscious if other seemingly essential

³⁴ MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1953. *Marxism: An Interpretation*. London, UK: SCM Press. 23.

³⁵ Gomes, Anil. 2024. *The Practical Self*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 9. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198864905.001.0001>.

³⁶ Gomes, 2024, 6. It may be objected that reciprocal recognition merely shifts the location of this leap of faith from the individual to the community level. For while reciprocal recognition ensures that we are rationally committed to understanding ourselves in the space of reasons upon recognising a recogniser recognising us, that initial ascription of the status of recogniser is still an article of faith, albeit one which goes on to be vindicated once reciprocated. It is important to remember, however, that normative alienation and genealogical anxiety are expressions of one’s insecurity regarding *one’s own* relation to the normative, not of one’s doubts about the rationality of one’s peers. This means that while it may indeed be a matter of faith to suppose that one’s peers are not automata, demanding that we provide a convincing argument against solipsism is not only an unreasonable demand to place on any theory of social interaction, but also irrelevant given our present argumentative objectives.

elements of our lives are to make sense, that presupposition – and the conclusions dependent on it – are perpetually vulnerable to being revealed, in the final analysis, to be nothing more than a grand delusion.

The second problem that Kant's metanormative constructivism faces arises from its focus on the thinking subject alone. For if we think of normative alienation as the failure to endorse the norms to which we are subject, we may be taken in by the suggestion that we can free ourselves from it simply by choosing to endorse the norms governing our conduct, whatever they may be. So long as the norms we end up endorsing are mutually consistent, what were once externally imposed injunctions become, so the story goes, self-imposed in just the way that Kant's account of autonomy, and hence of non-alienated conduct, requires.³⁷ The issue with this strategy is that it is always possible to restrict the success conditions of our willing so as to produce the illusion of autonomous self-sufficiency. As Berlin illustrates the point,

I wish to be master of my kingdom, but my frontiers are long and insecure, therefore I contract them in order to reduce or eliminate the vulnerable area. I begin by desiring happiness, or power, or knowledge, or the attainment of some specific object. But I cannot command them. I choose to avoid defeat and waste, and therefore decide to strive for nothing that I cannot be sure to obtain. I determine myself not to desire what is unattainable. ... It is as if I had performed a strategic retreat into an inner citadel – my reason, my soul, my 'noumenal' self – which, do what they may, neither external blind force, nor human malice, can touch. ... It is as if I were to say: 'I have a wound in my leg. There are two methods of freeing myself from pain. One is to heal the wound. But if the cure is too difficult or uncertain, there is another method. I can get rid of the wound by cutting off my leg. If I train myself to want nothing to which the possession of my leg is indispensable, I shall not feel the lack of it'.³⁸

For Kant, we too can train ourselves out of normative alienation by aligning our wills with the normative landscape into which we are thrown and endorsing the norms to which we are subject so as to avoid the nagging apprehension that we are not the masters of our lives. That, however, seems no better than self-delusion born of cowardice.

It is against this backdrop that we can discern one of Hegel's decisive advances over Kant: the insight that alienation is as much a product of the normative landscape in which we find ourselves – and of

³⁷ Indeed, given how frequently we find ourselves subject to conflicting normative demands, the universalisation procedure encoded in the first formulation of the categorical imperative aims to model a process which aims to accomplish just that.

³⁸ Berlin, 2002, 182.

the institutional structures that constitute it – as it is of our normative attitudes towards it.³⁹ For Kant, endorsing the norms to which we are subject is a matter of recognising the rationality of the commitments arising from the basic structure of practical reason as such. On this picture, the normative landscape is fixed for all on the basis of our minimally shared conceptual competence, whether or not we experience normative alienation in response to its prescriptions simply a matter of whether or not we align our wills with its authority. By contrast, Hegel argues that the normative landscape is itself made and sustained in and through the network of recognitive and recollective relations structuring the linguistic communities and institutions we inhabit. Not only does this mean that the structure of the normative landscape depends on the structure of recognitive and recollective relations, but also, crucially, that if those relations are pathological, then the normative landscape will itself exhibit pathologies from which we cannot but be alienated. As a result, whereas Kant seems to think that normative alienation is a challenge we can face alone, for Hegel it is a problem that can only be addressed by collectively restructuring the economy of social regard as manifested in the institutions of the state, law, and civil society.

Although a genuine improvement on Kant, the story Hegel retails about the nature of the normative landscape and the role it plays in constituting normative alienation is ultimately unsatisfactory. Hegel's insight is to recognise that alienation does not just depend on what's going on in the head of any one alienated agent, but also on what's going on in everyone else's heads. Indeed, it is precisely because the recognitive and recollective relations that constitute the normative realm are formalised in our social, political, and legal institutions that his analysis of discursive normativity proceeds via an extended discussion of the state and its forms of organisation over history. This is why, for Hegel, the task of ameliorating normative alienation requires social and political reform. Hegel's mistake, however, is to think that the institutions of the state can be improved and the experience of normative alienation remedied simply by changing our collective minds, that the institutions articulating our normative lives depend solely on what we (jointly) think about them. As Marx puts it, for Hegel, "the process of thinking, which, under the name of 'the Idea', he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the

³⁹ Indeed, the idea that our experience of normative alienation is a collective rather than an individual matter is reflected in Hegel's sustained interest in political philosophy. While Kant's analyses of the state, the law, and public culture figure as extensions or applications of core normative concepts such as autonomy and the Categorical Imperative, they assume a comparatively central role in Hegel insofar as the State gives public expression to the recollective determination of the discursive norms animating our forms of life.

real world is only the external, phenomenal form of ‘the Idea’” (C 457). This means, as Marx notes elsewhere, that because Hegel only “discovered an expression of the historical movement that is merely abstract, logical, and speculative” (*EPM_M* 106), he considers “wealth and the power of the state as beings alienated from man’s being ... only in their conceptual form. ... They are conceptual beings and thus simply an alienation of pure, i.e. abstract, philosophical thought” (*EPM_M* 108). As Marx articulates it,

With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. ... With him [the dialectic] is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you should discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell (C 457-8).

In reconfiguring Hegel’s abstract dialectic to the demands of the material, not only does Marx ground our institutions (and hence thought) on the practical pressures that structure our lives, but also makes visible the fact that normative alienation is, as Erich Fromm argues, partly a consequence of the *material* structure of a world that has “become[...] the monstrosity of a giant machine that prescribes the direction and tempo of [one’s] life”.⁴⁰ The point is not just that we are unable to (re)appropriate the social world we have made and inhabit because we lack the resolve or the normative powers to do so, but because its *material* organisation actively resists (re)appropriation.

Rather than starting with an explication of the conditions of practical reason as such, Marx’s account of alienation begins from an analysis of the concrete situations in which we practically engage with the world. For Marx, that means looking at the structure of economic production, i.e., at “the immediate relationship between the worker (labour) and production” (*EPM_M* 88), and at the reification of that relationship in the institution of private property. While a full explication of Marx’s account of alienated labour is beyond the scope of this investigation, one of its central consequences is worth remark. Marx notes that “although private property appears to be the ground and reason for [alienated] labour, it is rather a consequence of it, just as the gods are originally not the cause but the effect of the aberration of the human mind” (*EPM_M* 93). This is because private property just is, he continues, “the product of [alienated] labour and ... the means through which labour [alienates] itself, the realisation of this [alienation]” (*EPM_M* 93).⁴¹

⁴⁰ Fromm, Erich. 1980. ‘Zum Gefühl der Ohnmacht’. In *Gesamtausgabe*. Band 1: Analytische Sozialpsychologie. Edited by Rainer Funk. Stuttgart, DE: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt. 189. Found in Jaeggi, 2014, 24.

⁴¹ The David McLellan translation of *EPM_M* cited here translates “Entfremdung” as “alienation” and “Enttäusberung” as “externalisation”. The passages quoted above originally use the latter German term, so it would

On the one hand, this means that although private property, the abstract form of alienated labour, appears to us as the condition of alienation, it is in reality the patterns of relations embedded in the productive practices comprising our forms of life under capitalism which constitute the social form through which we then make sense of our practical activity. But on the other hand, this means that the patterns of practice characteristic of capitalist production take on the form of an objective structure which exerts *de facto* normative authority over our conduct regardless of what we happen to think about the matter and which thereby organises and delimits the possibilities of action. This means, as Marx puts it, that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (P 425). That Marx begins with an analysis of the practices constitutive of the objective structure of our social institutions rather than with our conceptually-articulated reflections upon them is precisely why he thinks his historical materialist programme is capable of turning Hegel right side up.⁴²

It is important to note that although the picture of capitalist production yielded by alienated labour is an inaccurate one, the fact that its concrete institutional manifestations (such as private property and the wage relation) nevertheless govern our practices means that it is no less real for it. Indeed, Catherine MacKinnon, writing about the socially constructed yet thoroughly objective nature of patriarchy, notes that

Epistemologically speaking, women know the male world is out there because it hits them in the face. No matter how they think about it, try to think it out of existence or into a different shape, it remains independently real, keeps forcing them into certain moulds. No matter what they think or do, they cannot get out of it. It has all the indeterminacy of a bridge abutment hit at sixty miles per hour.⁴³

MacKinnon’s point, of course, is that while patriarchy’s representation of the social world may be an ideological fiction, the fact that it exerts sway over the structure and functioning of our institutions means that it is nevertheless capable of producing objective effects.

And so we return to Brandom. For in just the way that Hegel devotes attention to the conceptual articulations through which our social practices find institutional expression, so too does Brandom attend to the discursive practices whose mastery is the hallmark of linguistic competence. However, for all of its

be more accurate to use the English “externalisation”. However, Marx uses the terms interchangeably, so I use the English “alienation” here for the avoidance of ambiguity.

⁴² For the canonical statement of historical materialism, see P 425-6.

⁴³ MacKinnon, Catharine A. 1991. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 123.

credentials as a pragmatic account of discursive practice, the specifically *material* character of our normative lives is precisely what goes missing on his analysis. The consequences for our conception of normative alienation are acute. For as Italo Testa puts it, Brandom

loses sight of the objective side of alienation – an estrangement caused by objective structural features [of the world] ... and reflected in subjective forms of misled identification. ... What we need to understand is rather that the notion and the phenomenon of alienation is neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective, since it has both objective conditions – a certain arrangement of the world – and subjective conditions – certain attitudes towards it.⁴⁴

Hegel's improvement on Kant is to recognise that alienation does not just depend on us, but on the structure of the normative landscape (and its institutional formalisations). Marx's improvement on Hegel is to recognise that alienation does not just depend on the structure of the normative landscape, but on the material structure of the social world. That Brandom attends to the discursive rather than the material character of normativity, to the subjective rather than the objective conditions of alienation, means that he stands to Wittgenstein as Hegel stands to Kant. We must stand to Brandom as Marx stands to Hegel.

5.5 Dissolving Genealogical Anxiety

Foregrounding the role that the material conditions of normative alienation play in determining the viability of metanormative constructivism requires that we reconsider the philosophical significance of genealogical anxiety and, indeed, the very nature of the problem to which this thesis is a response. This brings us back to the question that serves as the fulcrum of my argument: how ought we diagnose the phenomenon of genealogical anxiety? What is the underlying confusion which puts us into the frame of mind from which the question of the possibility of genuinely binding rational norms arises at all?

Marx's material concretisation of the threat of normative alienation establishes, I think, the background against which we can articulate the crux of the issue. Genealogical anxiety strikes us with such peculiar force because it expresses a philosophically intractable tension between the urge to alleviate our normative alienation, on the one hand, and its recalcitrance to alleviation, on the other. As seen in Section

⁴⁴ Testa, Italo. 2020. 'Spirit and Alienation in Brandom's *A Spirit of Trust: Entfremdung, Entäußerung*, and the Causal Entropy of Normativity'. In *Reading Brandom: On A Spirit of Trust*, edited by Gilles Bouché. New York, NY: Routledge. 152.

5.3, norms derive their authority over our conduct through our endorsement of them, implicit or explicit. Normative alienation is, by contrast, the phenomenon of being subject to norms we do *not* endorse, the grip that they exert over our conduct experienced as a kind of coercion. Ameliorating normative alienation duly involves making those norms in some sense our own by endorsing their authority in and through their self-imposition over our conduct. Indeed, Brandom's account of recollective reconstruction is, as argued in Section 3.4.2, an innovative means of accomplishing just that: in forgivingly rationalising our linguistic ancestors' concept applications into expressively progressive retrospective reconstructions, we make the norms governing their – and by extension, our – discursive practices our own by making their implicit content explicit. Yet as argued in Section 4.4, the issue with the story Brandom retails is that it fails to appropriately contend with the material, ideologically-inflected, power-laden institutional structures that give the norms to which we direct our recollective attentions determinate form. This means that unless and until its conditions of possibility are eliminated, genealogical anxiety ought to be considered ineliminable. While we may be able to ameliorate normative alienation's subjective conditions of possibility by rationally reconstructing the conceptual norms we inherit from the armchair, as it were, its objective material conditions of possibility lie beyond the reach of philosophical amendment. That is instead a task for concerted political action.

Why, then, might we think that normative alienation is intractable? Explicating the reason for this perhaps pessimistic conclusion requires distinguishing two ways in which norms can be legitimately authoritative over our discursive conduct. On the one hand, some norms are binding over our conduct because they are *rationally* authoritative. Rationally authoritative norms are genuinely authoritative both because they motivate adherence on the basis of communicable reasons in principle accessible to all and because they are themselves amenable to justifications whose force we can endorse or reject. This is the kind of authority held by the norms governing the inferential relations between propositions.

On the other hand, some norms, while also genuinely binding over our conduct, are unresponsive to rational reflection – individual, collective, or recollective. Norms of this kind do not hold rational authority, but matter-of-factual, *conventional* authority. This is the kind of authority held by the norms which govern the association of terms and utterances of natural language. Such norms are conventionally authoritative because while they are indeed genuinely binding, there is no further reason to which we can appeal in justifying them. Indeed, while there *must* be determinately correct and incorrect ways of speaking

if meaning is to be possible (think, for instance, of what our language would look like if there were no association between the sounds we uttered and the terms we intended to use), it is not clear if it even makes sense to think of the norms governing the association of terms and utterances as the kinds of things it is possible to endorse or reject.

What, then, does it mean to say that a norm has conventional rather than rational authority? Consider, for instance, the word ‘sister’. The fact that it is correct (in English) to use the word ‘sister’ to refer to female rather than male siblings might have some interesting etymological explanation, but there is no philosophically relevant *reason* why sister could not have referred to male siblings. Indeed, we can imagine a close possible world in which it did. As David Lewis puts it,

Words might be used to mean almost anything; and we who use them have made them mean what they do because somehow, gradually and informally, we have come to an understanding that this is what we shall use them to mean. We could perfectly well use these words otherwise – or use different words, as men [*sic*] in foreign countries do.⁴⁵

Lewis’ point, of course, is that the connection between the words and sentences we utter, on the one hand, and the terms and propositions they denote, on the other, is entirely arbitrary, a matter of nothing more than linguistic chance that the utterance of *these* words and sentences mean such and such terms and propositions. And yet despite that arbitrariness, the connection between utterance and meaning is no less genuine or authoritative for it. As Sorin Bangu notes, it simply *is* unqualifiedly incorrect (in English) to say that “he is your sister” when referring to someone’s female sibling.⁴⁶ Yet were we to be pressed on *why* ‘she’ is the correct term to use instead, there is little to say beyond ‘because it is’. Indeed, as Bangu continues, there seems to be no answer to the question: “why *this* rule, and not another?”⁴⁷ All we can do is appeal to the ways we speak.⁴⁸ This means that while we undoubtedly are subject to genuinely authoritative norms of linguistic conduct in our employment of natural language, they are at the same time not endorsable and

⁴⁵ Lewis, David. 2002. *Convention: A Philosophical Study*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. 1.

⁴⁶ Bangu, Sorin. 2021. ‘Hard and Blind: On Wittgenstein’s Genealogical View of Logical Necessity’. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 102 (2): 441. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12661>.

⁴⁷ Bangu, 2021, 451.

⁴⁸ This reflects Donald Davidson’s observation that “if we merely know that someone holds a certain sentence to be true, we know neither what he means by the sentence nor what belief his holding it true represents”. There seems to be no principled means of determining if someone uses a concept in a different way to us (i.e., correctly or incorrectly) or if they hold a different concept to us. Davidson, Donald. 1973. ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47: 18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3129898>.

hence cannot be made our own. And while this means that we have no choice but to consider ourselves inhabitants of the space of reasons, inducted in virtue of our linguistic competence, it also means that we are wont to find it alienating, government by the unendorsable norms we contingently happen to inherit a perpetual source of genealogical anxiety.

The implications of this conclusion are stark. For as McDowell puts it,

natural language, the sort of language into which human beings are first initiated, serves as a repository of tradition, a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what. The tradition is subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it. Indeed, a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance. ... But if an individual human being is to realise her potential of taking her place in that succession, which is the same thing as acquiring a mind, the capacity to think and act intentionally, at all, the first thing that needs to happen is for her to be initiated into a tradition as it stands.⁴⁹

If McDowell is correct and induction into the practices that constitute what it is to speak a natural language at all is constitutive of having a mind, that natural language is the very medium of thought, then normative alienation from the norms governing natural language amounts to nothing less than alienation from our own minded intentionality. And if the discursive norms governing correct and incorrect uses of natural language are shaped by the social, institutional, and historical practices in which they are embedded, then what is at stake in our discussion of genealogical anxiety is, at bottom, the political constitution of mind.

Lewis goes on to provide a genealogical investigation of his own in response to the question of the bindingness of conventionally authoritative norms.⁵⁰ For Lewis, regularities of linguistic behaviour become endowed with normatively binding force in the course of solving game theoretic coordination problems. The basic idea is that regularities of linguistic conduct should be thought of as equilibria in cooperative game situations.⁵¹ Since we each have an independent interest in coordinating our actions to achieve both individual and collective ends, we each have an independent reason to maintain the equilibrium in which we find ourselves since doing so requires communicating our intentions and preferences. Moreover, even if

⁴⁹ McDowell, 1996, 126.

⁵⁰ Lewis, 2002, esp. Ch. 1: Coordination and Convention and Ch. 5: Conventions of Language.

⁵¹ Timothy Williamson pursues a similar strategy to motivate the guiding commitment of knowledge-first epistemology: the claim that knowledge is an irreducible epistemic state. For Williamson, we have an overriding epistemic interest in knowledge over other epistemic states such as belief or ignorance because its factivity ensures that its “essence includes a matching between mind and world”, a feature particularly important and useful for us. Williamson, Timothy. 2000. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. 40.

there are other preferable equilibria, we will prefer to maintain the existing equilibrium since coordinating the transition to another will incur game costs and deviation risks. That we have an overriding preference to maintain an existing equilibrium in the face of otherwise preferable equilibria – and hence an independent reason to abide by it – is what transforms a regularity into a convention, a regularity endowed with normative force in the form of a rule. What may initially appear to be nothing more than ‘mere’ regularities of linguistic conduct can thus, under certain circumstances, become more than straightforwardly empirical.⁵²

Against this backdrop, Bangu argues that the norms governing what counts as correct and incorrect discursive practice can be thought of as “hardened regularities”.⁵³ Rather than encoding implicit cooperative covenants, norms are, for Bangu, regularities of conduct “that have been *endowed* with normative force – not mysteriously, by a higher power, but by *us*, by consensus”.⁵⁴ On this analysis, norms are contingent ways of going on which we have come to treat as reasons for and against going on in certain ways. This accords with Wittgenstein’s claim that, given an empirical description of how we collectively tend to go on, “it is as if”, as he puts it, “we had hardened the empirical proposition into a rule” (*RFM* VI-22).⁵⁵

However, it is vital to note that communal *consensus* should not be conflated with communal *assent*, nor should we think of the hardened regularities governing our discursive practices as the product of innumerable game theoretic payoff matrices catalogued on some Platonic scoreboard. Rather, as Wittgenstein repeatedly reminds us, the kind of intersubjective agreement constituting the consensus that certainly *is* a condition on the possibility of meaning “is not an agreement in *opinions*” (*RFM* VI-49), but, as he puts it elsewhere, agreement “in the *language* [we] use” (*PI* §241). “That”, he continues, is “agreement ... in form of life” (*PI* §241).

⁵² It is interesting to note that Lewis’ argument is thoroughly genealogical in nature, the emergence of discursive norms naturalistically explained with the aid of a just-so story about the communicative requirements of cooperation.

⁵³ Bangu, 2021, 452.

⁵⁴ Bangu, 2021, 452.

⁵⁵ See also Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1976. *Wittgenstein’s Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics: Cambridge, 1939*. Edited by Cora Diamond. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. 98: “It is enlightening to look on a calculation as a picture of an experiment. ...

If it is a calculation, we *adopt* it as a calculation – that is, we make a *rule* of it. We make the description of it the description of a *norm* – we say, ‘This is what we are going to compare things with’. ... If we call it a calculation, it’s a complete picture which now serves as a standard or phraseology for the description of an experiment.

We might have adopted $2 + 2 = 4$ because two balls and two balls balances four. But now we adopt it, it is aloof from experiments – it is petrified”.

It is precisely the fact that discursive normativity consists in agreement in our shared forms of life, forms of life shaped and delineated by the various subjective, intersubjective, and objective conditions in which we find ourselves, which enables us, finally, to dissolve the problem of genealogical anxiety. For if the normative authority of natural language is conventional rather than rational, then there is a very real sense in which the norms constitutive of linguistic competence and through which we ‘acquire a mind’ in the first place are, while no less authoritative for it, a matter of sheer contingency. *Had* the conditions shaping our forms of life or the conventions struck in response to them been otherwise, the norms governing how we ought to go on – how we ought to speak, think, and act – *would have* been otherwise. Yet since the anxiety with which we regard that contingency is but a symptom of the social pathologies to have infected what it is to think, speak, and act under conditions of oppression, this means that genealogical anxiety ought not to be understood as a *philosophical* problem at all, but as a social and political one. For while genealogical anxiety is an intelligible response to the precariousness of discursive normativity, it presents itself as a problem only if we are unable to endorse the norms that constitute the forms of life we inhabit, if, that is, we are alienated from them. Since alienation arises only under particular social conditions, this means that if we are to free ourselves from the grip of genealogical anxiety, then, *contra* Brandom, it is not sufficient to simply get our account of discursive normativity and its underlying semantics in order. Rather, we must render the practical conditions of discursive practice – our forms of life – such that they become amenable to collective, recollective endorsement. On this analysis, genealogical anxiety is the expression of a demand to transform the material circumstances on which our normative alienation depends. Until they are, genealogical anxiety shall remain intractable.

Conclusion

What Are We Doing When We Do Genealogy?

Over the course of this thesis, I have constructed an expansive picture of genealogical inquiry and genealogical anxiety. We began our investigation by setting out to determine whether or not we ought to be genealogically anxious. In Chapter 1, upon reviewing the different conceptions of genealogical anxiety in the literature, I argued that its strongest formulation is to be found in the rule-following paradox because it raises a deep question about the possibility of normativity in the face of genealogical contingency. In Chapter 2, I defused two common objections to the cogency of genealogical inquiry by developing a new typology of genealogy with which to organise the literature. In Chapter 3, I argued that because the rule-following paradox depends on a specious two-stage metasemantic strategy, and because the contingency of our discursive practices is in fact essential to their being contentful at all, genealogical anxiety is unwarranted. In Chapter 4, I pivoted my investigation to examine the diagnostic question of why genealogical anxiety presents itself as a problem requiring solution in the first place by identifying why the error from which it arises is so alluring. I went on to argue that the putative viability of two-stage metasemantic strategies depends on the obtaining of ideological discursive conditions, which in turn depend on the obtaining of oppressive social conditions. Finally, in Chapter 5, I argued that genealogical anxiety ought to be thought of as a philosophically intractable expression of normative alienation. The upshot of my argument is that genealogical anxiety is a legitimate response to the social and historical conditions which make such ideological and alienating conditions possible. However, since genealogical anxiety is at the same time an expression of the pathologies lacing those conditions, it is a social problem to be remedied through concerted political action, not a philosophical problem to be remedied from the armchair. Pursuing this strategy enabled us to dissolve genealogical anxiety as a philosophical problem.

There are two final implications of the picture of genealogical inquiry I have constructed worth remark, one theoretical, one political. Together, they outline the distinctive place that genealogical inquiry occupies in philosophy.

The theoretical point to which I draw attention has until now lain in the background throughout my argument. That idea is that if, as I have argued, we are to take the social embeddedness of discursive practice seriously (as we must if we are to develop a workable account of discursive normativity), then we must regard the space of reasons and the space of law as thoroughly *entangled*, the apparent duality with which we first viewed them nothing more than a chimera. This is not, of course, to say that there is no distinction between the space of reasons and the space of law, nor is it to say that each is an appropriate *explanans* for every possible *explanandum* that constitutes our normative lives. However, it does mean that neither order of explanation is apt to the task of describing our normative lives exhaustively since, as Wittgenstein explains, “the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing” (*OC* §98). In regarding our performances both as events that happen and as deeds done, genealogical inquiry traces the dynamics informing what gets treated as what so that we might, to co-opt Yeats’ way of expressing it, “hold in a single thought” the first- and third-personal descriptions of the world, each other, and ourselves.¹ This means that instead of two distinct realms of experience, the space of reasons and the space of law denote two orders of explanation whose resources we can opt to employ or not, but both of which we must be able to navigate if we are to have mastery of either. On this picture, genealogical inquiry is the form of philosophical explanation which mediates the transition from one order of explanation to the other.

Construing the relationship between the space of reasons and the space of law in this manner also has determinate political consequences. For if the question of whether we ought to assent demands that we refer to the conditions which give rise to our dispositions to assent, then there is, as Amy Allen argues, no sharp distinction between power and authority.² Once again, this is not to say that there is no such thing as genuine authority or, as Foucault’s less charitable critics interpret him, that authority is nothing but power. It is instead to say that power and authority exist on a continuum which structures the shifting, permeable

¹ Yeats, W. B. 1937. *A Vision*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Macmillan & Co. 25.

² Allen, Amy. 2010. ‘The Entanglement of Power and Validity: Foucault and Critical Theory’. In *Foucault and Philosophy*, edited by Timothy O’Leary and Christopher Falzon. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

boundary between the space of reasons and the contingently given, historically variable space of law in which it is ensconced. Crucially, this also means that the resources of genealogical inquiry are essential to the task of understanding the possibilities for genuinely radical political agency within the constraints imposed by the social and historical givens which (at least partially) condition it, givens which are, as seen in Section 4.4, frequently iniquitous.

This brings us to the political implication of my argument. As I have argued, genealogical inquiry, in prompting us to reflect on how and why the field of discursive possibility has been constituted as it has, makes the conceptual frame through which we understand the world salient to analysis. In so doing, those previously given frames can be rendered alien and unfamiliar. Genealogical anxiety arises as a result of realising that the ways we have previously found it natural to navigate the world are just some among many possible ways of navigating the world. This means, however, that alongside the sense of vertigo with which it often strikes us, genealogical anxiety should also be understood as the murky realisation that things can be otherwise, the first step towards exercising our agential capacity to *make* things otherwise. As such, while I have predominantly presented genealogical anxiety as a cause for philosophical concern, there is thus also a sense in which it can – and should – be viewed as a coming to awareness of as yet unarticulated political possibility.

The title of this thesis is taken from a line in *Philosophical Investigations*. When asked by his imaginary interlocutor: “What is your aim in philosophy?”, Wittgenstein replies: “To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (*PI* §309). A fly-bottle is a simple device for trapping flies and other flying insects. While found around the world in different forms, the kind found in Central Europe that Wittgenstein would have encountered comprises a conical bottle made of glass with small feet to raise it above a plate on which it is placed. A large opening in the bottom of the bottle is surrounded by a trough. Alcohol or vinegar is poured into the trough from a smaller opening at the top of the bottle and which is then closed with a cork stopper. Sugar is placed on the plate to lure the flies which then fly up through the large bottom opening into the bottle. The flies then fall into the alcohol or vinegar and drown.

What is the purpose of this metaphor? What does Wittgenstein use it to show us? As I understand it, Wittgenstein is saying here that we find ourselves drowning in various philosophical quandaries (such as the anxiety with which we regard the history of our own discursive practices and the seeming impossibility

of normativity) because we have flown into a philosophical trap from which we cannot escape. Yet while the way out is obvious to see from the outside, the reason we cannot find it from inside the fly-bottle is because, as Wittgenstein puts it, we are already “commit[ted] ... to a particular way of looking at the matter” (*PI* §308), a way of looking at things just as optional as flying into the bottle in the first place.³ Just as the fly bumps against the walls of the fly-bottle, so do we fruitlessly bump up against the self-imposed limits of practical and philosophical possibility. In this respect, as Ian Hacking understands it, the proverbial fly-bottle delineates the “space of possible ideas” from which “many of our perplexities arise”.⁴ On this reading, my aim in investigating genealogical anxiety has been to point the way out of a particular way of regarding the historical contingencies which shape our lives, one into which we need not fly and out of which we can escape should we so choose. Yet to paraphrase Hacking, I think the key point to be extracted from the metaphor (regardless of whether or not Wittgenstein would himself approve of the interpretation) is the fact that the fly-bottle in which we find ourselves has been formed by history and whose shape only genealogy can display.⁵ On this reading, my aim has been to trace the social and historical forces which have shaped the space of reasons in which we find ourselves as it is only by understanding its frontiers in the present that we can expand it in the future.

³ It may, of course, be natural to look at things in a particular way just as it is natural for a fly to fly upwards after having its fill of sugar.

⁴ Hacking, Ian. 2002b. ‘Historical Ontology’. In *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 26.

⁵ Hacking, 2002b, 26. See also Hacking, Ian. 2002d. ‘Leibniz and Descartes: Proof and Eternal Truths’. In *Historical Ontology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 213.

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