

What use, if any, are there for genealogies in philosophy?

A genealogy, generally speaking, is a historical analysis of a concept or practice. The method can be traced back to Herder, Hegel¹, and Hume², but was popularised by Nietzsche and his polemic *On the Genealogy of Morality*. While it has a long history of use, there remains a dilemma about how genealogy functions and in particular how it functions for Nietzsche. If we understand him as treating the history of a practice as prescriptive, he commits a genetic fallacy. On the other hand, if we take his genealogy to be merely historical description, it appears to lack the philosophical import that Nietzsche needs for his broader project.

I argue that genealogy has two functions, it can *destabilise* our beliefs and can *facilitate* critique of our practices. I will demonstrate these roles by arguing that the function of Nietzschean genealogy in *GM* is neither critical in itself, nor merely descriptive, but is *preparatory* for a larger evaluative project. First, I outline three key features of the method of genealogy. Second, I present the descriptive interpretation of Nietzschean genealogy and draw on Merrick to identify two problems with it; both of which suggest that the genealogy is more than merely descriptive, instead being evaluative in itself. Third, I draw on Forster and Kail to argue that a preparatory reading solves these two problems. It does so by demonstrating how genealogies can *destabilise* our beliefs and *facilitate* critique of our practices, retaining the normative force of Nietzsche's genealogy and highlighting its role in his evaluative project while not committing him to a genetic fallacy.

1. The Method of Genealogy

In this section I will outline the method of genealogy to make clear what is agreed on. I will begin by summarising two core features of the genealogical method: a commitment to naturalistic explanations and the tracing of multiple lines of influence. Then I will consider one way in which genealogies often differ, namely in the extent to which they are fictional or historically accurate.

Central to the genealogist's investigation is a commitment to naturalism. A genealogy does not only trace the origin of a particular practice or concept but does so using naturalistic terms and explanations rather than appealing to supernatural entities. For example, a genealogist will be reluctant to appeal to gods or metaphysical postulates in order to explain the emergence of a phenomena. We see this in the second essay of the *GM* where Nietzsche traces the emergence of bad conscience to a 'conflict between man's animal nature and the constraints imposed by civilised intercourse with other human beings'³ rather than some divine intervention on the part of an otherworldly god. We will see the importance of this feature later on.

¹ Both Herder and Hegel shown in Forster (2011).

² Hoy (1986).

³ Leiter (2003, p173).

A second feature of genealogy is best brought out in contrast with another form of historical analysis, pedigree⁴. A pedigree traces a single line of unbroken succession from a singular origin (bestowing value upon the object inherited from its origin). A genealogy, by contrast, does not trace a single line of succession leading to an identifiable origin. Instead, the item is shown to have been constituted by a number of different lines of influence – presenting no obvious origin. In Nietzsche, this is seen through his separate genealogies of the aspects of compassionate morality: the first essay traces how *resentiment* lead to the slave revolt; the second traces the origins of *bad conscience*; the third examines a distinct constituent, the *ascetic ideal*. This results in, as Geuss notes, the contemporary notion being a synthesis of various different meanings imposed on it from the past⁵.

Finally, despite the lack of scholarly referencing⁶ in the *GM*, Nietzsche is not telling a merely fictional story or engaging in fanciful speculation about the emergence of morality. Nietzsche intends his genealogy to be historically accurate. We see this when he contrasts himself with the English psychologists; he is concerned with the ‘real *history of morality*’, avoiding ‘English hypothesis-mongering’ in favour of ‘that which can be documented, which can actually be confirmed and has actually existed’ (*GM, P:7*). Some genealogists, Williams for example⁷, have conducted fictional genealogies but this stands in direct contrast to what Nietzsche does in his genealogy.

2. The Descriptive Interpretation of Nietzsche’s Genealogy

Now that the important features of genealogy have been outlined, I will turn to the point of disagreement – what role genealogies play in Nietzsche’s *GM*. I will begin by outlining the descriptive interpretation of Nietzschean genealogy, then I will present two problems for this interpretation given by Merrick⁸.

2.1 Nietzschean Genealogy as Descriptive

At first it seems as though Nietzsche is giving a genealogy which shows morality to have emerged from something lower rather than something higher in order to reveal something about its current value. It has shameful origins, and upon realising this we should take the contemporary practice to have less value. But this interpretation commits Nietzsche to an invalid form of reasoning, he commits the *genetic fallacy*. This fallacy is committed when the history of an object of inquiry is thought to in itself be consequential for the value of the object, as is concluded in tracings of pedigree. Not only is this an uncharitable interpretation of Nietzsche, but it is incoherent due to Nietzsche explicitly expressing his awareness of this fallacy elsewhere. For example, in the *Gay Science* he writes: ‘Even if a morality has

⁴ Geuss (1999, p276).

⁵ Geuss (1999, p282).

⁶ Plausibly explained by Brian Leiter (2003) as Nietzsche intentionally avoiding the scholarly format in order to maintain *GM*’s polemical style.

⁷ Williams (2002).

⁸ Merrick (2016, p232-233 and p235).

grown out of an error, the realisation of this fact would not so much as touch the problem of its value' (*GS*, 345). In another passage he writes 'Origin and critique of moral valuations. These two things do not coincide, as is facilely supposed (this belief is itself already the result of a moral judgement to the effect that "something that has come to be in such and such a way is worth little because its origin is immoral" (eKGWB 1885, 2[131])⁹.

In order to be both charitable and accommodating of his awareness of this fallacy, some have argued for a descriptive reading of his genealogy. Sedgwick¹⁰ offers a characterisation of this dominant interpretation in the literature¹¹. On this view, genealogy functions solely as a 'description of the conditions under which a particular morality arose'. The first essay in *GM* tells us that the emergence of morality can be accounted for in a strictly causal way that does not require supernatural or 'divine intervention'. Instead, offering a story that shows the 'material and social conditions under which an ethical system' develops is in some manner decisive in determining the values that a particular system holds. This descriptive function of genealogy does not contribute to the evaluative project of determining the "order of rank among values" (*GM*, I:17). For this part of Nietzsche's project, a further step is required which goes 'beyond the parameters of the genealogical method'. This constitutes a further meta-evaluative standpoint by which we can assess the value of a practice, in Nietzsche's case compassionate (Christian) morality.

On this view, the genealogy has no evaluative function – making plausible sense of Nietzsche's sensitivity to the genetic fallacy.

2.2 Two Problems for the Descriptive Interpretation

Despite its appeal however, the descriptive approach faces multiple issues, as raised by Merrick¹², which suggest that Nietzsche's genealogy is intended to be more than merely descriptive. I will focus on two of these here.

One of these is levied at the descriptive reading from consideration of Nietzsche's broader normative project. If it is true that the genealogies in *GM* do no more than give a causal description of the emergence of morality, then it will only motivate a very limited set of readers to pursue a separate critique of the compassionate morality system. Due to the genealogy being merely descriptive, the evaluative standpoints of the readers will not be changed. The readers that do go on to critique their moral practices will be ones that already share Nietzsche's evaluative perspective, those that don't share this perspective will not be moved to critique morality. On the descriptive reading, the genealogy is 'left devoid of its bite'¹³. It goes no way towards ending the tyranny of the practices Nietzsche is concerned with and pushes us no closer to reconvening the discussion of the value of our moral values.

⁹ Italics original.

¹⁰ All quotations from Sedgwick (2000, p28-29) unless noted from the *GM*.

¹¹ As stated in Merrick (2016, 229).

¹² Merrick (2016).

¹³ Merrick (2016, pp235).

So, Merrick argues, this interpretative strategy cannot account for a central practical aim of *GM*.

The second objection comes from an interpretation of a passage in the preface which aims to show that Nietzsche takes the genealogy to be ‘critical in nature and not merely descriptive’¹⁴. The passage reads:

This problem of the *value* of pity and of the morality of pity [. . .] seems at first to be merely something detached, an isolated question mark; but whoever sticks with it and *learns* how to ask questions here will experience what I experienced—a tremendous new prospect opens up for him, a new possibility comes over him like a vertigo, every kind of mistrust, suspicion, fear leaps up, his belief in morality, in all morality, falters—finally a new demand becomes audible. Let us articulate this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values themselves must first be called into question*—and for that there is needed a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which they grew, under which they evolved and changed. (*GM P:6*)

Here, Merrick identifies three relevant claims¹⁵: (1) the problem of the *value* of morality produces the need for critique. (2) This critique requires knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which the practice evolved and developed. (3) The demand, then, is for both historical knowledge and a ‘critique that is *based* on such knowledge’¹⁶. According to Merrick, genealogy is ‘not detached from critique’, we need to stick with Nietzsche in order to learn that the genealogy has *both* descriptive and critical functions. But only the former function is accounted for by the descriptive interpretation.

This shows that, while the descriptive interpretation appears plausible due to Nietzsche’s awareness of the genetic fallacy, it fails to accommodate Nietzsche’s critical aspirations. The aim then is to offer an interpretation which reconciles his normative project with a valid form of reasoning. A preparatory reading, as I will argue, offers such an interpretation.

3. Genealogy as Preparatory

A *preparatory* reading is presented briefly by Forster¹⁷, but is further developed by Kail¹⁸, and can be further strengthened with Queloz’s understanding of genealogy¹⁹. I argue that genealogy prepares us in two ways for a revaluation of all values: first, by loosening the grip of the particular practice he is concerned with over its reader, *destablising* our beliefs; second, by providing us with more knowledge of a practice, *facilitating* a future evaluation of the practice. In doing so, it answers the two challenges outlined above for the descriptive interpretative strategy – which the preparatory reading can be seen as a

¹⁴ Merrick (2016, p233).

¹⁵ All quotations in this paragraph from Merrick (2016, p232-233).

¹⁶ Italics added.

¹⁷ Forster (2011).

¹⁸ Kail (2011).

¹⁹ Queloz (2021).

development of. The first answer makes clear how genealogy retains its ‘bite’, the second explains in what sense the critique of values is ‘based’ on the knowledge yielded from a genealogy.

Forster writes that Nietzsche ‘sees genealogy as *preparation* for evaluation, rather than as already *involving* it’²⁰. This is evidenced by Nietzsche stating that, as in the passage above, we need knowledge of the conditions and circumstances under which the moral values developed in order to conduct the revaluation of values. But it also gains other textual support throughout Nietzsche’s intellectual biography, *Ecce Homo*. When discussing *GM*, Nietzsche writes that the essays are ‘A psychologist’s three crucial *preparatory* works for a revaluation of all values’²¹. The essays are not in themselves evaluative, but are methodologically prior to the evaluation, they are steps that enable a revaluation. Further, when discussing the *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche notes that as soon as he finished this book, he grasped the ‘tremendous task of the *Revaluation*’ (*EC:TI:3*) and is here referring to his later work the *Anti-Christ*²². This suggests that the revaluation was a task to be completed after the preparatory work conducted in the *GM*.

Forster takes the genealogy to be a means to ‘better understanding, or explaining, psychological outlooks and psychologically laden practices, and especially a means to self-understanding’²³. It contributes to this understanding by showing ‘in a naturalistic way that and how they have developed historically out of earlier origins’²⁴. This is not wrong, as I will show later, but more needs to be said about what exactly this self-understanding does for Nietzsche, how it is preparatory, and why it is philosophically relevant.

3.1 Destablising

Kail has a more sophisticated development of the preparatory reading which answers Merrick’s first challenge. One of the functions of Nietzsche’s genealogy is to ‘break the closed circle of moral evaluation by preventing his interlocutors from helping themselves to the central beliefs that frame their normative thinking, and so effect the possibility of a genuine revaluation.’²⁵. Nietzsche positions himself not only against the non-naturalistic interpretations of morality, but also against those, like the English psychologists, who have ‘taken the value of these ‘values’ as given, as factual, as beyond all questioning’ (*GM, P:6*). What is common to all moral theories so far is that they have given privilege to a set of intuitive moral beliefs in the value of selflessness, altruism and compassion. In order to enact a genuine revaluation, the ruling normative status of these beliefs must be dislodged.

GM does this by serving as a *destabilising* genealogy. Destabilising genealogies function by way of generating a need for further justification, justification that was previously assumed or given. A common example of this form of genealogy is pointing out to, say, a

²⁰ Forster (2011, p232), italics original.

²¹ Italics added.

²² Edited by Ridley and Norman (2005).

²³ Forster (2011, p232).

²⁴ Forster (2011, p232).

²⁵ Kail (2011, p228).

Christian that if they had grown up in a family sharing any alternative religious belief system, they likely would've also inherited that belief system. Being a somewhat responsible epistemic agent, the Christian should then experience a form of genealogical anxiety until they have found more stable epistemic ground. As Kail argues, the mechanisms that Nietzsche appeals to throughout his genealogies are those that are 'not sensitive to features relevant to the truth of the belief thus explained'²⁶, instead Nietzsche shows them to have emerged because they 'serve the psychological well-being of the believer'²⁷.

Nietzsche's genealogies show beliefs that are characteristic of his target to have developed through epistemically unreliable mechanisms. This prevents their normative authority from being assumed or taken as "given" and as "data" in the "science of morals" (*BGE*, 186). Once the grip of these beliefs is loosened, Nietzsche has gone some way towards putting an end to the "tyranny" of the morality that 'says stubbornly and inexorably, "I am morality itself and nothing besides is morality."' (*BGE*, 202). This shows how the genealogies function as normative *destabilising* devices in Nietzsche's broader project – bringing us closer to a revaluation of these values²⁸.

3.2 *Facilitating*

Recall that in the second objection Merrick offered an interpretation of section six of the preface, arguing that Nietzsche does not see genealogy as detached from the critique of moral values. The three claims Merrick identifies are plausibly extracted from the passage, and Merrick is right that genealogy yields knowledge relevant to the critique of values – but leaves it ambiguous as to what sense the critique is *based* on this knowledge. There are two interpretations of this claim. It could mean that the knowledge of morality's history will be consequential for the evaluation of morality in the genetic sense; its shameful origins are telling of its current value (as seen in tracings of pedigree). Alternatively, it could mean that the historical knowledge that Nietzsche demands will *facilitate* critique, providing comprehensive knowledge of the practice that enables an educated evaluation. The first interpretation of this claim is a problem for the descriptive interpretation of Nietzsche's genealogy because it does not account for this evaluative aspect; however, this version of the claim is not plausible because it commits Nietzsche to a genetic fallacy (something which, as noted above, he was explicitly aware of). The second interpretation of this claim, on the other hand, is not a problem for the descriptive interpretation of genealogy and is also, I argue, a more plausible interpretation.

Nietzsche observes at the start of the preface that 'we are unknown to ourselves' and that 'we have never looked for ourselves, - so how are we ever supposed to *find* ourselves?' (*GM*, P:1). He intends to remedy

²⁶ Kail (2011, p229).

²⁷ Kail (2011, p229).

²⁸ Importantly though, Nietzsche does not intend to "debunk" all moral values, as this would seem to further humanity's move towards nihilism – something he himself is keen to avoid. In fact, Queloz (2019) argues compellingly that Nietzsche is a critic of a certain form of global genealogical debunking for similar reasons.

this lack of self-knowledge, expressing the demand for knowledge of our moral practices, practices that have so far gone unquestioned. Nietzsche wants knowledge of ‘morality as result, as symptom, as mask, as tartuffery, as sickness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, remedy, stimulant, inhibition, poison [and this is because we have] neither had this knowledge up till now nor even desired it’ (*GM, P:6*). He intends to plug the gaps in our knowledge of ourselves so that we can see our practices in a new light – where we might discover potentially harmful aspects. The genealogy enables us to fully understand our practices which gives philosophical relevance to the greater self-understanding noted by Forster above.

It also demonstrates the second function of genealogy which is closer to the purely descriptive function put forward by the dominant interpretation; but understanding it as *facilitating* critique better coheres with Nietzsche’s normative project. In section six of the preface, Nietzsche raises the following questions to motivate the type of knowledge he is after: ‘what if a regressive trait lurked in ‘the good man’... so that the present *lived at the expense of the future?*’, perhaps we will find that we live ‘in more comfort and less danger; but also in a smaller-minded, meaner manner’ (*GM, P:6*). One of his central concerns is whether the ideas we are organising our lives by, the conceptual practices that we engage in, are good for us, and good for humanity as a whole²⁹.

A conceptual practice is just the ‘technique that renders concept-users sensitive to certain features of the world and links them in their minds with certain inferences in thought and action’³⁰. What conceptual practices we engage in will bear directly on the types of lives we live, so we can reasonably ask why we should organise our lives by one concept rather than another. When understanding the full scope of a practice, the knowledge Nietzsche suggests that he seeks of morality, our evaluations of and decisions to engage in the practice will be better informed. Such knowledge is the sort gained from his genealogy, it will bear on reasons for or against engaging in a practice – this will be dependent on the ‘different angles’ (*GM, I:17*) we evaluate from. If we locate a ‘*great* danger to mankind’ (*GM, P:5*), and want to avoid this danger, then we have reason to cultivate alternative conceptual practices. In this way, genealogies are preparatory by *facilitating* critique of our practices despite not being in themselves evaluative.

Conclusion

This essay shows that the preparatory reading of Nietzsche’s genealogy is interpretively attractive and demonstrates two uses of the method of genealogy. While the descriptive reading successfully accounts for Nietzsche’s awareness of the genetic fallacy, Merrick offers two compelling objections which suggest that such a reading leaves the genealogy lacking the philosophical force Nietzsche requires for his

²⁹ Importantly, this is not to say that in *GM* he is reverse engineering concepts by tracing their functions. Even though Queloz (2021) has identified that he does seem to do this in his earlier genealogies of justice and truth, Nietzsche is explicitly critical of this approach in the *GM* (*GM, I:2,3; II:12*).

³⁰ Queloz (2021, p24).

evaluative project. Such force is accommodated for by the preparatory reading which synthesises both Nietzsche's awareness of the genetic fallacy and his normative ambitions, showing it to be more than merely descriptive but not in itself evaluative. It establishes two preparatory functions of genealogy which are present in the *GM*. It can *destablise* our beliefs by showing them to have been generated by epistemically unreliable mechanisms, and it can *facilitate* critique by yielding knowledge that will bear directly on our reasons for engaging in conceptual practices.

For Nietzsche, both of these functions bring us closer to his goal of conducting a revaluation of all values. But these uses of genealogy have application in philosophy more generally. Genealogies may offer valuable insights by both destabilising notions which are currently being taken for granted, and by developing a deeper understanding of the terms and concepts we use which in turn can facilitate critique of these practices.

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