**Genealogy**

This term’s lectures have featured a number of Nietzsche’s historical accounts (of e.g. conscience, moral values of good and evil, scientific practice and the will to truth, the concept of causality). Nietzsche’s historical method is referred to as “genealogy”.

So what is genealogy?

*Narrow (everyday sense of) Genealogy*: Sometimes genealogy is the study of ancestry or “family history”. Many hobbyists trace their family tree; they are sometimes called “amateur genealogists”.

Narrow genealogy is too narrow to be Nietzsche’s genealogy because, of course, his concerns are much bigger than family trees (with no disrespect to amateur genealogists). And those concerns are not purely historical – the aim is to leverage historical analysis in the service of critique

*Broad (philosophers’ sense of) Genealogy*: Sometimes genealogy is understood much more broadly: a study of the conditions under which something emerged, developed, or was formed.

Broad genealogy is too broad to be Nietzsche’s genealogy, primarily because it includes non-historical analysis e.g. beliefs formed through hearsay or the reading of authoritative text.

(For more on this see Amia Srinivasan, ‘Genealogy, Epistemology, and Worldmaking’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 119(2), 127-156 (2019))

So Nietzsche’s genealogy must be both historical and critical

**The Genetic Fallacy**

One major problem for this is the genetic fallacy: it is a mistake to assess the truth of a belief on the basis of how the belief was formed. Nietzsche himself is not blind to the fallacy, it seems:

1. The mistake of the more subtle among them [historians of morality] is that they uncover and criticise the possibly foolish opinions of a people about their morality, or of humanity about all human morality – opinions about its origin, its religious sanction, the myth of the free will and such things – and then think they have criticised the morality itself. But the value of the injunction ´Thou Shalt´ is still fundamentally different from and independent of such opinions about it and the weeds of error that may have overgrown it -just as surely as the value of a medication for someone sick is totally independent of whether he thinks about medicine scientifically or the way an old woman thinks about it. **A morality could even have grown *out of* an error, and the realization of this fact would not as much touch the problem of its value.**

(*The Gay Science* §345)

**Ways to Avoid the Genetic Fallacy**

1. **Uncritical genealogy**

Nietzsche’s genealogy just gives historical facts, and does not infer conclusions about present day beliefs or values.

e.g. Christoph Schuringa ‘Nietzsche’s Genealogical Histories and His Project of Revaluation’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31(3) (2014)

*Problem*: this reading has to deny a lot of evidence to the contrary, for example:

1. we need a critique of moral values, the value of these values should itself, for once, be examined - and so we need to know about the conditions and circumstances under which the values grew up, developed and changed (morality as result, as symptom, as mask, as tartuffery, as sickness, as misunderstanding; but also morality as cause, remedy, stimulant, inhibition, poison), since we have neither had this knowledge up till now nor even desired it.

(*On the Genealogy of Morality* Preface, §6)

1. **Was Nietzsche really a historian?**

No, according to what I will call **myth-maker** readings of Nietzsche. Myth-maker readings tend to read Nietzsche’s genealogy as “just-so stories” that are fictional rhetorical devices to elicit e.g. distaste for morality among readers.

Versions of the myth-makers readings can be found in:

* Ken Gemes, "We Are of Necessity Strangers to Ourselves': The Key Message of Nietzsche's Genealogy," in *Nietzsche's "On the Genealogy of Morality",* ed. C. D. Acampora, (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).
* Robert Guay, ‘The Philosophical Function of Genealogy’, in Keith Ansell Pearson ed. *A Companion to Nietzsche* (Blackwell, 2005).
* Simon May, *Nietzsche’s Ethics and His War on “Morality”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

*Problem:* evidence that Nietzsche’s genealogy was intended as a form of factual history: Nietzsche closely studied the work of contemporary historians including Leopold Schmidt and Irish historian William Lecky. A good account of this is given in: Christoph Schuringa ‘Nietzsche’s Genealogical Histories and His Project of Revaluation’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31(3) (2014)

More evidence that Nietzsche’s genealogy was intended as a form of factual history: his writing often includes historical methodology (comments on the proper method of history).

For example, the second untimely meditation *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*. In this essay Nietzsche identifies three modes of history: monumental history, antiquarian history, and critical history:

1. Each of the three species of history which exist belongs to a certain soil and a certain climate and only to that: in any other it grows into a devastating weed. If the man who wants to do something great has need of the past at all, he appropriates it by means of monumental history; "he, on the other hand, who likes to persist in the familiar and " the revered of old, tends the past as an antiquarian historian; and only he who is oppressed by a present need, and who wants to throw off this burden at any cost, has need of critical history, that is to say a history that judges and condemns. Much mischief is caused through the thoughtless transplantation of these plants: the critic without need, the antiquary without piety, the man who recognizes greatness but cannot himself do great things, are such plants, estranged from their mother soil and degenerated into weeds.

‘On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’, §2 (p.72 in the Cambridge University Press edition of the *Untimely Meditations*)

The History Essay also complains about the “suprahistorical” tendencies of Nietzsche’s contemporaries: a God’s eye view of history which sees through the mutability of apparent things in order to identify a principle or law that has remained constant and can explain change over time. (We will return to this below)

1. Whether the sense of this teaching is happiness or resignation or virtue or atonement, suprahistorical men have never been able to agree; but, in opposition to all historical modes of regarding the past, they are unanimous in the proposition: the past and the present are one, that is to say, with all their diversity identical in all that is typical and, as the omnipresence of imperishable types, a motionless structure of a value that cannot alter and a significance that is always the same.

‘On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’, §1 (p.66 in the Cambridge University Press edition of the *Untimely Meditations*)

1. **History as essential to self-understanding**

Bernard Williams argued that history is essential to philosophy insofar as the latter is a project of collective self-understanding.

See Bernard Williams, ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’ in his *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline,* Princeton University Press, 2006.

There are a number of forms this kind of history can take. One is “vindicatory history”: presenting historical developments as a series of improvements to demonstrate that our present beliefs are, if not demonstrably true, at least preferable to the known alternatives. Nietzsche’s genealogy might be a critical version of this (tracing a series of deteriorations).

*Problem*: if such histories are successful as arguments for/against the truth or value of present beliefs, they are redundant.

1. **Revival of historical sense**

A more sophisticated version of “family tree” genealogy: Nietzsche’s genealogy is “reverse pedigree”

See Raymond Geuss, 'Nietzsche and Genealogy', in his Morality, Culture and History: Essays in German Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1-28. Reprinted in J. Richardson and B. Leiter, eds., Nietzsche (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.322-40.

Tracing a pedigree would attempt to demonstrate or enhance the perceived value of a person or an object by revealing an unbroken line of succession from present object to a single origin of great value (e.g. noble ancestry).

By contrast, Nietzsche’s reverse pedigree:

* Does not vindicate its object;
* Identifies multiple sources and origins from which present phenomena have developed;
* Identifies uneven, discontinuous, and multiple lines of succession from origins to present phenomena.

This succession includes a series of change, alterations, and reinterpretations of beliefs, concepts, and values, that make their origins almost unrecognizable to contemporary perspectives. (Recall, for example, Nietzsche’s genealogy of conscience).

See also Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in P. Rabinow, ed., The Foucault Reader (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971/1984), pp. 76-100. Reprinted in J. Richardson and B. Leiter, eds., Nietzsche (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 341-60.

1. Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, **on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times**.

(Foucault, ibid, p.341, emphasis mine)

As Nietzsche might put it, his genealogy approaches history in a way that resists the urge to define its object:

1. With regard to the other element in punishment, the fluid one, its 'meaning', the concept 'punishment' presents, at a very late stage of culture (for example, in Europe today), not just one meaning but a whole synthesis of 'meanings' [Sinnen]: the history of punishment up to now in general, the history of its use for a variety of purposes, finally crystallizes55 in a kind of unity which is difficult to dissolve back into its elements, difficult to analyse and, this has to be stressed, is absolutely undefinable. (Today it is impossible to say precisely why people are actually punished: all concepts in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated defy definition; only something which has no history can be defined.)

(*On the Genealogy of Morality,* Essay 2, §13)

But does this help us with the genetic fallacy? Geuss suggests that Nietzsche’s genealogy is not a direct critique of morality, but it does destabilise the beliefs that support moral values e.g. religious faith or belief in freedom of the will.

1. **Creating the possibility of critique**

Geuss’s reading is not designed to solve the problem of genetic fallacy. But *mutatis mutandis*, I think it can.

Genetic fallacy arises for Nietzsche if genealogy is critical because it infers evaluative claims about morality from historical premises. But this is not the only way genealogy could be critical. The other critical purpose that Nietzsche has in mind comes before we even raise objections to moral values; it is simply raising the question of the value of morality

1. This problem of the *value* of compassion and of the morality of compassion (-I am opposed to the disgraceful modern softness of feeling-) seems at first to be only an isolated phenomenon, a lone question mark; but whoever pauses over the question and *learns* to ask, will find what I found: - that a vast new panorama opens up for him, a possibility makes him giddy, mistrust, suspicion and fear of every kind spring up, belief in morality, all morality, wavers, - finally, a new demand becomes articulate. So let us give voice to this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values should itself, for once, be examined* –

(*On the Genealogy of Morality* Preface, §6)

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche repeatedly accuses his contemporary genealogists of morality (including one-time friend Paul Rée) of being like the suprahistorical individual characterised in his earlier essay:

1. Now another word on the origin and purpose of punishment – two problems which are separate, or ought to be: unfortunately people usually throw them together. How have the moral genealogists [like Rée] reacted so far in this matter? Naively, as is their wont -: they highlight some 'purpose' in punishment, for example, revenge or deterrence, then innocently place the purpose at the start, as causa fiendi of punishment, and - have finished.

(*On the Genealogy of Morality*, Essay 2, §12)

The problems that Nietzsche sees in other histories of morality are twofold: that they project modern moral prejudices onto the history of morality; and that these prejudices prevent a proper “historical sense”, and render moralists blind to the possibility of questioning morality. Compare this section in *Beyond Good and Evil*

1. You will have to forgive me for having discovered that all moral philosophy so far has been boring and should be classified as a soporific – and that nothing has done more to spoil “virtue” for my ears that this *tediousness* of its advocates; although I would not want to underestimate their general utility. It is quite important that as few people as possible think about morality – consequently, it is *really* quite important for morality not to somehow turn interesting one of these days!

*Beyond Good and Evil* §228

**Additional Admin**

1. Lecture schedule this term:

Week 1 – Nietzsche the immoralist

Week 2 – Suffering and tragedy

Week 3 – Master and slave moralities

Week 4 – Moralism and guilt

Week 5 – Genealogy

~~Week 6 – Freedom and fate~~ **cancelled due to UCU industrial action**

Week 7 – Will to power

Week 8 – Truth and perspectivism

1. Reading group: *The Gay Science*

Fridays **12.15-1.15pm**, weeks 2 - 8 **NB New time**

Faculty of Philosophy Graduate Common Room

Schedule:

24 Jan: The Gay Science, Book 1, sections 1-21  
31 Jan: The Gay Science, Book 1, sections 22-51  
7 Feb: The Gay Science, Book 2, sections 52-91  
14 Feb: The Gay Science, Book 2, sections 92-107  
~~21 Feb: The Gay Science, Book 3, sections 108-152~~ **cancelled due to UCU industrial action**  
28 Feb: The Gay Science, Book 4, sections 276-311  
6 Mar: The Gay Science, Book 4, sections 312-342

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