How Does Genealogy Contribute to Normative Political Theory?

Sequential Genealogy: The Methodological Starting Point

Introduction

This work is very much in progress, with emerging ideas that I hope to develop into a full paper. Nevertheless, it is not without a position: the aim is to show how genealogy can be absorbed into normative theory, by tracing a path to the idea of sequential genealogy.

I begin with Nietzsche, specifically drawing on a quote which I feel accurately describes genealogy’s original premise: of being committed to the principle of the historical contingency of all truths, concepts, practices and beliefs. From this brief grounding, I emphasise Foucault’s main contribution to genealogy, as a project with the purpose of thinking “differently” (Foucault, 1990, p. 8) through the reflection that a denaturalizing method brings: therefore as anti-polemical. I support this through citing David Owen’s similar comments regarding genealogy.

From this concept of the alternative, I look at Tyler Krupp and Mark Bevir’s assertion that although genealogy is an enemy of the given, universal ‘truth’, it need not be so towards a contingent one. In this then is room for genealogists, being those with the ‘different’ way of thinking, to communicate with normative theorists who provide the “regulative ideal” (Bevir, 1999, p. 126). Genealogy here finds a balance between “unmasking” (Hoy, 2008, p. 276) and simple reflection that does not lead to polemics: staying true to Foucault’s understanding of it. By utilising Krupp however, I maintain a place for genealogy in a world of acknowledged contingency. In this is a space of communication, effectively where ‘thinking differently’ and the acceptance of a contingent truth as “best account of the world currently on offer” (Bevir, 2008, p. 269) can combine: here genealogy can either contribute to normative theory by being
a useful “toolbox” (Foucault, 1994, pp. 523-524) from which to pick and choose, or as “the better version to the “best account”.

From the belief that genealogy can accept contingent claims and even become one, I then look at how this leads into David Hoy’s discussion of the “vindicatory genealogy” (Hoy, 2008, p. 276). I claim that in this vision of a genealogy which can vindicate a historically contingent idea, we can build a theory of genealogy which explicitly separates narration from reflection, where the former is simply a “technique of inquiry” (Bevir, 2008, p. 275) or method of denaturalisation, and the latter is the subsequent valuation of this; I call this sequential genealogy.

To bolster this idea I come back to Nietzsche, pulling the concepts discussed thus far together to show how we can perceive of genealogy as two separate, sequential activities. As a result, I make two observations. First, that when we think of and use genealogy in this way, we begin our genealogical project from a methodological starting point. Secondly, that if this is so we are able to draw on normative criteria in a genealogy (to either critique or vindicate that which we have historicised in the reflection which follows said narration), without contradiction, for normative criteria we use can simply be understood as narratives that we have previously put a value on.

I conclude with a tentative notion: of genealogy, when seen in this way, as a ‘show not tell way of doing normative theory’. Not forgetting the original premise of the abstract I submitted, I make a post-comment on the effect this may have on our political theory canon.

**Genealogy: The Original Premise and “never engage in polemics”**

It is almost a trope when talking of genealogy to start with Nietzsche, but as a good friend of mine always says, not all tropes are bad. The German philosopher of course did not continue the ‘conversation’ of ‘what is good and what is evil?’, but instead asked: “under what
conditions did man invent the value judgements good and evil? And what value do they themselves have?” (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 5). Of course, this sets up genealogy as the method of exposing that which deigns to “masquerade as utter certainties based on a pure reason or pure experience” (Bevir, 2008, p. 269), or to bring that which have become “canons of reasons” back to being merely “forms of reasoning” (King, 2009, p. 306). The original premise of our genealogy then, is to make sure that “the truth, and not merely the truth for their times” (Strauss, 1988, p. 68) and the “quest for universal knowledge” (Strauss, 1988, p. 11) was dealt a mortal wound, or to put it less dramatically, all truths, concepts, beliefs or practices had historical locations. I feel there is little need to dwell on this: it is an oft repeated analysis (but necessary to reaffirm), so the reader must forgive me for the brevity.

Foucault of course, could in some ways said to be a ‘disciple’ of Nietzsche, or perhaps it would be better to say one of Zarathustra, being that he did not stay in his shadow. Foucault took genealogy into fascinating areas: madness, psychiatry, and discipline. He showed great scholarly dedication to revealing how power was not just hidden in morality, but sex and knowledge. For me, his biggest achievement was to offer alternative narratives without closing his work off to those who one may consider his ‘opponents’. In short, his commitment against being polemical. Indeed, when he openly stated it, I think it is the closest he ever veered to contradiction: “in all of this I will therefore propose only one imperative, but it will be categorical and unconditional: never engage in polemics” (Foucault, 2009, p. 18).

The emphasis then was on thinking differently, not claiming one was thinking correctly, or even having the right answer. The mere possibility of thinking differently, to see if it was attainable, and therefore to see what insights one gained from it was the ultimate purpose. Indeed, there is even a hint that such theorising was with the overall aim of moving on from it, or even that other ways and methods of thinking, like normative theory, needed genealogy,
in order to carry on doing what it claimed it was doing. In other words, to give normative theorists self-doubt through bringing back the “noncommonsensical knowledges” that had been buried “by the hierarchy” of their “erudition” (Foucault, 2004, p. 8), was to make them better, to rescue them from a lack of evaluation over their own approaches, to save them from given truths and therefore breathe new life into normative theory: “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (Foucault, 1990, p. 8).

When we come to David Owen, who wrote on Foucault’s form of genealogy, this is reinforced. Genealogy is to ask the question “What difference does it make to look at the problem this way rather than that? What difference does it make to approach the problem under this picture rather than that?” (Owen, 2002, p. 227). This freed us from being “held captive” (Owen, 2002, p. 226) to a particular understanding of the world, to enable us to imagine and envisage alternative ways of ruminating: to not restrict our theorising and explore another “picture or perspective” (Owen, 2002, p. 221) we may have thought closed to us. This did not rely upon the destruction of our opponents, for with genealogy we were not here to “correct an ideological mistake” or give the “non-distorted view” (Owen, 2002, p. 227): genealogy could not claim that for it undermined its original premise. As genealogists it was our responsibility to “present rival pictures” to help both ourselves and others “see the limitations of one’s own picture” (Owen, 2002, p. 227). It is difficult to argue how genealogy is not in this view, part of normative theory, a partner for “reciprocal elucidation”. Thus, like Foucault, we could as genealogists still have a “normative interest” (Owen, 2002, p. 225) or curiosity, if not a universal commitment to normative beliefs as a fundamental “criteria”: if we cannot set up reflection framed by these foundations, we can be at least be led towards normative discussion by our own narratives.
Useful Genealogy, Better Version

This all being the case, genealogy becomes less aggressive to beliefs and concepts which recognise their “own contingency” (Bevir, 2008, p. 275), for these ‘truths’ are “authoritative because they are ‘shared’, not because they are given by pure reason or experience” (Krupp, 2008, p. 323). We may think this sounds genealogy’s death knoll, for it “may appear irrelevant to beliefs and practices that avow their own contingency and contestability” (Bevir, 2008, p. 227). What has genealogy left to do if its original premise has already been realised? Anti-foundationalism, the recognition of contingency, seemingly replaces genealogy.

However, there is a response to this, which Tyler Krupp offers. If such an anti-foundationalist view claims that inquiries into contingent truth rest upon a paradigm of shared values that also can be questioned (for they are not given truths), genealogy is necessary as the method within anti-foundationalism to examine the relationship between theories and the paradigms (or shared truths, accepted picture, etc) they rely on. In a sense, genealogy can expose if and when theories we develop, may actually be constituting the paradigm, rather than simply being dependent on it. Genealogy can examine “how we came to share those facts” that we base our theories upon: “why those facts strike us as the relevant ones, and why, occasionally, certain theories consistently fit the shared facts better than the competitors” (Krupp, 2008, p. 330). It is a compelling claim, and relies on a simple yet perceptive premise of needing genealogy because ‘the devil is in the details’, as it were. Merely accepting contingency is not enough, but on occasion one must actively investigate, to gain insight. In this, we can understand that there is a difference between acknowledging contingency and exploring it.

Thus, what we can take from Krupp is that genealogy, by giving us contingency, frames truth for anti-foundationalism to carry on with a normative pastime of truth-seeking. However, on occasion, we need to investigate that framing, not just acknowledge it. This is where
genealogy is reignited. What we can say then, is that although an anti-foundationalist stance will ensure normative theory continues to accept and embrace contingency, genealogy goes to a further extent of experiencing it: whether we come to critique, expose or vindicate, with genealogy we have arrived the long way round, and therefore have a thicker and more detailed view. One may say, a deeper, reflective position. It is this that I want to emphasise.

What we are seeing then in regards to some kind of relationship between genealogy and normative theory, is an increasing space for communication, for in this ‘experiencing’ of contingency genealogy’s purpose is ultimately about reflection. First then, in this conversation space, we have the notion of a useful genealogy. This is the idea of a “toolbox” (Foucault, 1994, pp. 523-524) genealogy, a genealogical account which can have the ‘good bits’ picked and chosen at will. Essentially, it is where those tools, or “indications of choice or statements of intent” (Foucault, 2009, p. 16) do not have to be taken wholesale, for genealogy is not an all-encompassing theory, but a choice or commitment to exposing the universal (or that which increasingly sails close towards it). Those choices need not be restricted to embracing genealogy as a life philosophy: that would contradict the idea of it not being all-encompassing, but merely a “rival” picture.

Likewise, the allowance that genealogy must have for the “best account of the world currently on offer”, being something that “avows its own contingency”, means that a genealogical account can not only be cherry-picked from, but if its account of events is so persuasive, it can even come to ascend the “best account” itself as the better version. Remembering that the foundation for “best account” are shared and relevant facts in comparison with each other, of which genealogy can be a part (even as Krupp shows, able to question which facts are seen as relevant), the idea of genealogy as a better version need not contradict.
Sequential Genealogy, Methodological Starting Point

This space we are opening up for genealogy, to be seen alongside normative theory, allows for the development of sequential genealogy. If we are able to reflect and compare a genealogical account with a normative one, or utilise genealogy to ensure our shared facts are indeed mutually experienced, then genealogy itself can surely be a method to give value to something that is historically contingent, and not just as a critique or “unmasking” of ideals (Hoy, 2008, p. 276). These beliefs almost invite genealogy to ‘double-check’ them. If genealogy can allow for truth which accepts its historicity, it can engage with such claims, and acknowledge when one appears as “the best account of the world currently on offer” (Bevir, 2008, p. 269). This is very astutely put by Mark Bevir who points out the necessity for genealogists to accept this type of “vindicatory” genealogy, for otherwise they could not believe their own “empirical content” (Bevir, 2008, p. 274). If what defines a genealogy at its base is the original premise of the historical contingency of all things, then genealogy itself is open to this denaturalizing process. Happily then, by acknowledging the idea of a vindicatory genealogy, the genealogist has “no reason” to “not believe both that radical historicism arose contingently, perhaps even accidentally, and that it is true” (Bevir, 2008, p. 275). This realisation that something historically situated and contingent can still have value, cannot be restricted to the perception of genealogy, but encompasses other practices.

Here are both uses and ponderings of genealogy that give us a picture of it being absorbed into normative theory discussion. What would I like to add to all this then? For me, what can emerge from this analysis of Foucault, Owen, Bevir, Tyler and Hoy and their combined ideas - of genealogy primarily as a way of thinking differently and the potentiality of vindicatory genealogy - is the possibility of seeing genealogy as two sequential activities.
Let us explore this. If genealogy can indeed be vindicatory, it would imply that there is of course a separation between historicising something and devaluing it. One need not necessarily lead to the other. Often I think, with all the hyperbole of “dynamite” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 90), we are in danger of conflating the two: to denaturalize something, is to offer an alternative version, but if vindicatory genealogy is indeed possible, this does not always have to steer us towards, and therefore is not the same thing as, an alternative view. The alternative view only comes when we have in fact decided that what we have made historically contingent, is of no value. In this case, all the denaturalizing of something can achieve, is to strip our chosen concept or belief of the authority of “the truth”. The historical location of a belief does not result in negative judgement, only enables a clearer, contingent and ‘thicker’ picture. The valuation comes from us, after we have performed the historical narrative. Thus, we can say there is a distinct and explicit separation within genealogy: a historical method of narration, and a philosophical reflection.

To get to the heart of what this means, we come full circle, and return to Nietzsche. I bring us back to the question which I used to establish the original premise of genealogy: “under what conditions did man invent the value judgements good and evil? And what value do they themselves have?” (Nietzsche, 1994, p. 5). Imagine that my analysis is wrong, and that philosophical reflection is not separable from historical narration, that the two are one and the same activity, or in the least, to be done simultaneously. This would mean that interwoven into the historicised account of morality is the valuation of it: they are not separate activities, but a kind of historicising philosophy. But how will we offer comparative values? Upon what experiences? In my view, this is where genealogy is often vulnerable to criticism regarding its use: that if we are committed to historical contingency as a form of “unmasking” truth or truth claims and as critique from the very outset, then upon what foundations, either moral or rational, can we criticise? In a sense, if genealogy is “dynamite” to such things, then on what
grounds can it itself argue without being caught in the explosion? Genealogy “reveals the contingency and contestability of ideas and practices that hide these aspects of their origins” (Bevir, 2008, p. 271). What route thus remains to the genealogist but relativism, a philosophical onion?

If however, we take the view that Nietzsche’s question is in fact separable in a linear sense, then possibilities are opened up to us. The first thing to recognise is that seeing genealogy as a historical narration followed by a philosophical reflection, means that where we start our genealogical projects, is from a methodological starting point. In this view, “Under what conditions did man invent…” is therefore a narrative formed from a methodological question, in the sense that it is an historical technique of locating a concept, belief or practice, in order to denaturalize it. There is in this separation no evaluation within the activity of historicising. The initial process of denaturalizing something within a perspective of sequential genealogy, does not include judgement: thus the narrative remains as method only. It is a “technique” to produce something, that something being reflection. The only function it performs then is as an alternative version of events (by its very definition it must be), which I reiterate is not to be conflated with the alternative view. That is what may or may not come after, depending upon whether we critique or vindicate.

This chronological approach to Nietzsche’s question is subtle but significant, when it comes to the use of the normative within a genealogy. Of course, the usual criticism here would be that one cannot be committed to the original premise and also make value judgements which will most likely come from a place of normative theory. Whereas the genealogist may be susceptible to criticisms and contradictory moves regarding the simultaneous use of historically contrived value-judgements whilst exposing historically contrived value-judgements, the separation of narration and judgement as two consecutive activities, I think, enables a more vigorous defence to this censure.
Let us ask Nietzsche’s question again, but this time sequentially. We begin not from a place of valuation, but of method, with the valuation distinctly positioned as a consequence of the narration. Beginning from this methodological starting point and not critique means we offer the alternative story, without being pulled into an alternative view: they are not one and the same activity. To denaturalize something in a narrative within a sequential genealogy is to know that once the narration has finished and the reflection enabled, we are no longer held to the restrictions of the method. In essence, when the narration stops, so does the process of denaturalization, the historical locating. We are taken from history to philosophy, as two separate activities, with their own rules and culture. All that is left is to say whether or not we value what has been revealed as historically contingent. If the answer is no and we do decide to critique, one can use normative criteria to make these judgements when genealogy becomes a sequential process of narration followed by reflection, on the supposition that the author is aware of the historical contingency of the criteria they use, but unlike that which they condemn, has for whatever reason put value on that criteria.

If all concepts are narratives, some must be valued over others (remember our “best account”). If another genealogist disputes the use of said normative criteria, then it is their job to undergo a sequential genealogy them self, to devalue these criterion. The genealogist may be misguided or ‘wrong’ in their choice of criteria, but it is not a contradiction to choose it. Hence, we do not betray the original premise of the genealogist, to denaturalize and expose that which “masquerades as given truth”, but we do not also have to turn to relativism as a result. Although we do not begin from normative criteria like a normative investigation, in a sequential genealogy we may come to it in our reflection: it emerges in philosophical musings involving attempts at “thinking differently”, presenting “rival pictures” and taking into account the “best account of the world currently on offer”.

Some clarifications through substantive examples will hopefully be of use here. Let us consider Jeremy Waldron’s article ‘The Issue of Homelessness and Freedom’. In some ways, the reader will see many parallels or alliances between my thesis regarding homelessness and anti-social behaviour and his piece (it is not the place to go into detail about this thesis here, but only explain what needs to be explained for the purpose of this paper). There is a fundamental difference however, from the very beginning. Jeremy Waldron brings fresh light to the plight of the street homeless, by framing such an existence within the principles of liberal political theory. Specifically, a commitment to negative freedom to show how the homeless completely lack it, because of communitarian stances on public space. At the same time as critiquing these responses, Waldron is also able to rejuvenate liberalism in regards to counteracting such problems: “The aim is to refute the view that, on abstract liberal principles, there is no reason to be troubled by the plight of the homeless” (Waldron, 1991, p. 295). Waldron’s lens of liberalism is a normative commitment that frames homelessness in a way that therefore compels us to be concerned about the homeless, because of and from this normative foundation. This picture of homelessness begins and builds its narrative from this allegiance: it is the basis of the argument, its “criteria”, and it influences and shapes our view of it.

Now consider a genealogy of anti-social behaviour, which asks the question, simultaneously, ‘under what conditions did man invent anti-social behaviour? And what value does it have in regards to homelessness?’ In this, the genealogist tries to weave a story of how anti-social behaviour has affected the homeless individual, but in making the valuation alongside this narrative, will need to instil some moralised concept whilst trying to deconstruct one at the same time. As such, we are persistently hovering around normative criteria that genealogy cannot offer us by itself without contradictions made in the same breath. This to me feels clumsy. In other words, we cannot give the historical narration and the philosophical
valuation at the same time without making normative commitments first: if they do not emerge from our reflection, and they are most certainly not coming from the narrative, then where do they originate but outside of the genealogy? A genealogy of anti-social behaviour which paraphrases Nietzsche’s question in a sequential manner however, can involve normative discussions, or our “normative interest”, for as I have argued the whole point of the reflection is to step outside of the narrative, and therefore outside of its restrictions, after it has been done.

**Conclusion: Show Not Tell Way of Doing Normative Theory**

By tracing a path which connects ideas regarding the nature of genealogy, what I have argued here, is the potential for a sequential vision of genealogy where historical method of narration and philosophical reflection are two separate activities. I believe and have indeed claimed, that this allows us to engage in normative theory post-narration, without being vulnerable to contradiction or betraying the original premise of genealogy’s historicising commitment.

Here I would like to present a conclusion that goes one step further: if we begin from a place of method without normative foundations but which can allow for the presence of normative arguments in the subsequent reflection, genealogy is a *show not tell* way of doing normative theory. In the narration of a sequential genealogy, as there is no foundational moral commitment beyond the other version of events, it does not begin with normative criteria, or base itself upon that, but as argued, does enable normative “interest” or curiosity to emerge from the reflection, elicited slowly, as openly acknowledged value judgements. As a methodological starting point then, genealogy can frame projects in a similar way to a theoretical framework, such as Waldron’s framing of homelessness, only without the normative appearing as the foundation. A genealogy’s foundation is the commitment to the alternative *version*, which is therefore a framework also, shaping and moulding a project to
this intention, but it is one that subsequently needs subsequently ‘filling up’ with a political or moral content if it is not to disappear to relativism. Such a thing seemingly appears almost as an afterthought, a reaction to the historical narration, when we ponder over what the radical historicist account has thrown up, to what extent it has unsettled our perspective of a specific thing, and consequently our picture of the world: hence, a “show not tell” way of doing normative theory.

1.6 Afterword: An Admission of Guilt

One last brief mention, more as something to follow this paper than to conclude it, and a little feeling of guilt at having not done exactly what the abstract which I submitted to this conference said I would do: discuss the effect of genealogy on our political theory canon. This paper changed somewhat, when I realised everything here that was explored had to be said prior to a paper regarding the effects on the canon.

I will therefore, throw up a small point as I depart, which may well lead to a paper on the canon actually being written. This vision of a ‘show not tell’ genealogy contributing to normative theory, when engaged with a political theory canon, reminds us not just to historicise what and who we read, but ourselves: what does a piece elicit from you, as the author, and why? What can that tell you about the distance between yourself and your chosen writer? Is the question less “what Plato would allow” (Waldron, 1995, p. 138) and more “what would we tell Plato”? By doing such a thing, we can perhaps maintain a canon which may include distasteful, male dominated and downright sexist views, for when they emerge it reminds us that reading an author is not just about seeing similarities, praising their intellectual heights and drawing us closer to them, but refuting some points, and realising and reinforcing a distance and separation, or another picture. Thus, one could, under such a lens, undergo a genealogy of the debate over the canon, where there is a very historicised
realisation of a male-dominated institution, and a subsequent call to dismantle or re-forge it anew. The canon itself then, is a necessary part of that discovery, the narration before the reflection.
References


