

VII — GENEALOGY, EPISTEMOLOGY AND WORLDMAKING

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We suffer from *genealogical anxiety* when we worry that the contingent origins of our representations, once revealed, will somehow undermine or cast doubt on those representations. Is such anxiety ever rational? Many have apparently thought so, from pre-Socratic critics of Greek theology to contemporary evolutionary debunkers of morality. One strategy for vindicating critical genealogies is to see them as undermining the *epistemic* standing of our representations—the justification of our beliefs, the aptness of our concepts, and so on. I argue that this strategy is not as promising as it might first seem. Instead, I suggest that critical genealogies can wield a sort of *meta-epistemic* power; in so far as we wish to resist the genealogical critic, we are under pressure to see ourselves as the beneficiaries of a certain kind of good luck: what I call *genealogical* luck. But there is also a resolutely non-epistemic way of understanding the power of critical genealogies, one that is essential, I argue, for understanding the genealogical projects of various theorists, including Nietzsche and Catharine MacKinnon. For critical genealogies can reveal what it is that our representations *do*—and what we, in turn, might do with them.

Happy is he who is able to know the causes of things.
—Virgil, *Georgics* II, v.490

I

Each of us finds himself not just already in the world, but already in a particular world: a particular moment in history, a particular culture, a particular family, a particular language, a particular body. What is more, our representations of the world—our beliefs, values and concepts—are radically shaped by these contingent facts about where we find ourselves in the space of possibility. What are we to make of this? Am I justified in having the beliefs, values and concepts I do if I have them only because of my particular, contingent history?

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?

This series of questions gives voice to what I have elsewhere called ‘genealogical anxiety’: the anxiety that the causal origins of our representations, once revealed, will somehow undermine, destabilize, or cast doubt on the legitimacy or standing of those representations (Srinivasan 2011, 2015). I say ‘somehow’ because it is not immediately clear just why genealogical revelations should have such an undermining effect. Likewise, it is not immediately clear what might be meant by ‘legitimacy’ or ‘standing’. But what does seem clear is that we humans, at least in some places and at some times, are prone to genealogical anxiety. Consider this fragment from the pre-Socratic philosopher Xenophanes:

Mortals suppose that the gods are born (as they themselves are), and that they wear man’s clothing and have human voice and body. But if cattle or lions had hands, so as to paint with their hands and produce works of art as men do, they would paint their gods and give them bodies in form like their own—horses like horses, cattle like cattle. (Xenophanes 1898, fragments 5–6)

According to Xenophanes, the Greeks believe that the gods exhibit human features only because they, the Greeks, are themselves human. This is why non-human creatures, if they were capable of depicting the gods, would do so after their own likeness: horses like horses, cattle like cattle. At the origin of Greek theology lies not reason or divine revelation, but an all-too-human cause—the narcissistic desire to make gods in our own image.

The form of Xenophanes' argument is familiar to us. We know its intended implication: that, because they have their origin in human narcissism, the Greeks' beliefs about the gods are deficient. And we not only recognize the form of Xenophanes' argument, but instinctively feel its force. It really does feel to us that this genealogical revelation should have some negative bearing on the Greeks' theology. On reflection, though, we can see that Xenophanes' genealogy does not entail that Greek theology is false. For it is perfectly consistent with his genealogy that the gods do resemble humans. To think otherwise is to commit the genetic fallacy: to falsely suppose that there is a general entailment from a belief's origin to its truth-value.¹ Even so, the feeling that Xenophanes' genealogy somehow undermines the standing of Greek theology remains.

Not all genealogies prompt anxiety. Some of them appear to have the opposite effect: affirming or legitimizing what they explain. Bernard Williams calls such genealogies 'vindicatory' (Williams 2002).² Famous examples include Locke and Hobbes's accounts of the emergence of the state, which are meant to not only explain but moreover justify their authors' favoured political arrangements. Like critical genealogies, vindicatory genealogies can be at once intuitively compelling and mysterious. We might instinctively feel that a 'good' pedigree reflects well on an idea, concept or value—but why should it? Indeed, why should a genealogy have any sort of normative significance? Perhaps our tendency to think it does is simply a product of a fetish for origins—a fetish from which philosophy should seek to set us free.

This was a common view amongst an earlier generation of analytic philosophers. The term 'genetic fallacy' was coined in 1934 by Ernest Nagel and Morris Cohen (1934, pp. 388ff.).³ Hans Reichenbach, in his *Experience and Prediction* (1938), warned

¹ There are cases in which a genealogy does entail the truth or falsity of a belief—for example, if I acquired a belief from an omniscient deity who invariably tells the truth (or lies).

² Williams uses the word 'shameful' where I use 'critical' (Williams 2002).

³ Nagel and Cohen identify not one but *two* genetic fallacies. The first 'takes a logical for a temporal order', assuming that what is logically simpler must be temporally earlier. This fallacy characterizes early modern a priori histories: 'theories . . . [of] the origin of language or religion, or the original social contract by which government was instituted', which insist on what "the first" or "primitive" man *must* have done' (Nagel and Cohen 1934, p. 389). The second is the converse of the first: 'the supposition that an actual history of any science, art, or social institution can take the place of a logical analysis of its structure' (1934, pp. 389–90). While the second version of this fallacy poses a prima facie problem for critical genealogies, the first version poses a prima facie problem for many vindicatory genealogies. On the genetic fallacy, see also Horkheimer (1993, p. 141).

against conflating the ‘context of discovery’ with the ‘context of justification’: where a theory came from and whether it was in good epistemic standing, Reichenbach insisted, were two distinct questions. Reichenbach appears to have been motivated to draw this distinction—between context of discovery and context of justification—to counter the Nazis’ condemnation of theories of ‘Jewish origin’, including his own; Reichenbach wrote *Experience and Prediction* in Istanbul, where he fled in 1933 after being dismissed from his post in Berlin (Giere 1996). Of course, if Reichenbach is correct, nothing of philosophical interest can be gleaned from this fact, and I have just wasted your time with historical irrelevancies. Indeed, Reichenbach’s distinction serves as a pre-emptory defence of analytic philosophy’s general lack of concern with the contingent contexts from which philosophy itself emerges.⁴ Karl Popper went further still, arguing that historicist inquiry was not only irrelevant to the pursuit of philosophical truth, but morally pernicious (Popper 1957).

Despite the discipline’s historical hostility to genealogical thinking, analytic philosophers in the last thirty years or so have become increasingly in thrall to critical genealogies. Many contemporary ethicists claim that the naturalistic or evolutionary origins of our moral judgements demand that we abandon those judgements, or (on pain of moral nihilism) adopt an anti-realist construal of their contents (Harman 1977, 1986; Singer 1981, 2005; Gibbard 1990; Kitcher 2005, 2011; Joyce 2006; Street 2006, 2008, 2011; Greene 2007; Huemer 2008; Rosenberg 2011). Daniel Dennett (2006) has argued, via a naturalistic genealogy of religious belief, against the rationality of theism, echoing early modern arguments put forward by Hobbes ([1651] 1996, ch. 12), Spinoza ([1677] 2018, Appendix I), Toland ([1704] 2013, letter 2)⁵ and Hume ([1757] 2007), and later by Feuerbach ([1841] 1957), Nietzsche ([1886] 1996, [1887] 2007, [1888] 1968), Marx ([1844] 1975) and Freud ([1927] 2001). James Ladyman and Don Ross (2007) have argued that the evolutionary origins of our metaphysical judgements should make us suspicious of their capacity to get us onto the mind-independent truths about reality. Their argument is in turn presaged by Nelson Goodman (1978) and Hilary Putnam (1981), both of whom argued from the

⁴ For an argument that the logical empiricist rejected racial taxonomies on political rather than epistemological grounds, see Bright (2017).

⁵ Thanks to Eric Schliesser for this example.

cultural contingency of our ontological schema to forms of anti-realism about ontology. Finally, the new ‘experimental philosophy’ is partly devoted to debunking philosophy’s reliance on intuitions, by showing how intuitive judgments systematically vary with culture, gender and socioeconomic status (Knobe and Nichols 2008, 2014). In other words, experimental philosophers seek to offer a critical genealogy of analytic philosophy itself. For better or for worse, analytic philosophy is no longer innocent of genealogical anxiety.

II

This recent embrace of genealogical anxiety no doubt has much to do with the new-found availability of critical genealogies from the cognitive and evolutionary sciences. Before this, critical genealogies came from what many analytic philosophers think of (to put it mildly) as more *speculative* modes of inquiry: from sociological and anthropological observation, from historical reconstruction, and—especially in the twentieth century—from Freudian, Marxist and Foucauldian attempts to unmask the operations, respectively, of the unconscious, material modes of production, and discursive power.⁶ For my part, I see little in evolutionary debunking arguments that is not already present in Xenophanes’ genealogy of Greek theology. (Indeed, Xenophanes’ genealogy is itself the product of a scientific revolution: the naturalistic revolution in cosmological thinking ushered in by the Milesian philosophers of sixth-century Ionia: Kahn 1997.) In the arguments of both Xenophanes and the contemporary evolutionary debunker, there is a charge of what we might call *alethic indifference*: our beliefs (in, for instance, human-like gods or morality) are said to be produced by a causal mechanism (narcissism, evolution) that we have no independent reason to believe will tend to produce true beliefs about the relevant matter (theology, morality). Intuitively, alethic indifference—even if it does not *entail* that our theological or moral beliefs are false—bears negatively on the

⁶ Historically, critical genealogies appear to emerge from two opposed impulses: naturalism and idealism. The first impulse leads to the thought that our representations are susceptible to causal rather than rational explanation. The second impulse, at least in its post-Kantian incarnation, raises a worry—given the historicity of consciousness—about the availability of a privileged view of the world.

justificatory standing of those beliefs. Because justification is a requirement on knowledge, these genealogies thus intuitively threaten our claims to know the (theological, moral) truth.

So, by extension, do all genealogies that reveal our beliefs to originate in alethically indifferent mechanisms.⁷ Most of my empirical beliefs presumably have genealogies that do not point to alethic indifference. My belief that I am in a lecture hall has its origins in my reliable visual perception of the lecture hall in which I find myself, and in my reliable ability to apply the concept *lecture hall*. Indeed, the genealogy of my belief that I am in a lecture hall might be a paradigm example of a vindicatory genealogy.⁸ By contrast, my moral, religious and metaphysical beliefs all seem to be caused by cultural, historical and evolutionary forces that I have no antecedent reason to think track mind-independent moral, religious or metaphysical truths.

Why might genealogies that reveal alethic indifference threaten epistemic justification? Philosophers have offered various answers to this question, arguing that beliefs with alethically indifferent genealogies fail to satisfy some or other condition on justification or rationality (for example, Vavova 2016; Braddock 2017; Schechter). Other philosophers, myself included, have been more pessimistic, concluding that there is no plausible way to vindicate the genealogist's inference from alethic indifference to lack of knowledge (Srinivasan 2009, 2015; White 2010). I cannot here offer a full defence of my pessimism. But the heart of it is this. I take it that the most promising way of vindicating the critical genealogist's claim is to say that our moral, religious or metaphysical beliefs are based on what epistemologists call an *unsafe* mechanism—that is, a mechanism that could easily lead me to false beliefs (Sosa 1999). Other

⁷ While my focus in this section and the next will be (for the sake of ease) beliefs, much of what I say can be carried over to critical genealogies of concepts. Such genealogies purport to threaten the *aptness* of the concepts they genealogize—that is, the ability of such concepts to carve the world 'at its joints'. A genealogical critic might argue, for example, that we only think about the world in terms of the concepts of liberal democracy (*equality, human rights*, etc.) because we have been trained to use such concepts. A defender of the aptness of such concepts has available to her analogues of the defences offered in §§III and IV: she might argue that we (liberal democrats) are *genealogically lucky* vis-à-vis these concepts, or endorse a sort of anti-realism about such concepts that effectively guarantees their aptness.

⁸ That said, one can imagine a critical genealogy of empirical beliefs: 'The only reason you believe you're in a lecture hall is that it *seems* to you that you are in a lecture hall. But that you are in a lecture hall isn't what *causes* you to so believe...'

unsafe belief-forming mechanisms include hallucinogenic drugs, brainwashing, and visual illusions. Such mechanisms, even if they happen to get me onto the truth, might have easily not done so, which is why they do not conduce to knowledge. Even if, say, my particular cultural formation endows me with true moral beliefs, there are nearby possible worlds in which a different cultural formation endowed me with contrary (and false) moral beliefs. Having moral beliefs based on the contingencies of culture is like believing, on the basis of wishful thinking, that Donald Trump won't be re-elected: true, hopefully, but unsafely grounded. Since a belief must be safely grounded in order to constitute knowledge, my moral beliefs, the argument goes, fall short of knowledge.

The safety principle is, I think, the critical genealogist's best hope. The problem, however, is that the critical genealogist, in invoking a safety condition on knowledge, risks begging the question against his opponent. When deciding whether a particular belief-forming mechanism is safe, to what evidence can we appeal? Suppose the critical genealogist is attempting to impugn my feminist commitments as a mere product of leftist indoctrination. He points out that had I been educated differently, I wouldn't have my feminist commitments. Does this not impugn the safety of the method on which I base my feminist beliefs, namely, the method of believing in accordance with my political formation? My response surely will be that this is *not* my belief-forming method. I don't simply believe in accordance with what I was taught to believe. My feminist commitments are based, rather, on reflection on the experiences of women, myself included, aided by the interpretative resources of feminist theory. Patriarchal beliefs, meanwhile, *are* based on an inferior method, namely, the method of believing in accordance with a false ideology. The critical genealogist will presumably retort that to insist on the superiority of *my* belief-forming method requires that I presuppose the truth of the very feminist commitments that are under attack.

What is at issue here is how to individuate belief-forming methods for the purposes of assessing their safety. The problem is that there is no principled, independent answer to be given to this question—that is, independent of the very first-order beliefs that are in dispute. Any judgement about what counts as a distinct or superior method will have to be informed, in a circular fashion, by whether we judge the relevant case to be a case of knowledge. Thus the critical genealogist who appeals to safety will risk begging the question against his

opponent. For he will have to make assumptions about method-individuation that will in turn be informed by his judgement that the beliefs in question are not justified. But this is to presuppose precisely what must be proven.⁹

What is more, the critical genealogist is faced with a threat of *self-defeat*.¹⁰ If he is right that our genealogically contingent beliefs in moral, theological or metaphysical propositions are unjustified, it would seem to follow that our genealogically contingent beliefs in epistemological propositions are likewise unjustified. Our epistemological beliefs appear to depend on the contingencies of culture, history and evolution in much the same way as our moral, theological or metaphysical beliefs do. Indeed, take the safety principle itself. One is much more likely to believe in it if one did one's philosophical training in recent years at Oxford.¹¹ The critical genealogist's argument thus seems to imply that we ought not to believe one of its own premisses—that is, the very premiss that safety is a condition on knowledge.¹² (I have chosen to elaborate the genealogical critic's argument in terms of safety, but much the same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for whatever epistemic principle is evoked.) Of course, that the critical genealogist's argument is self-defeating is not to say that its conclusion is false. It is to say that the critical genealogist can offer his opponent little reason to accept his conclusion. Indeed, if his argument is sound, it appears to follow that he can offer us *no* reason to believe it.

III

It might appear that we are back where we began: with the diagnosis that critical genealogies exercise an irrational appeal. But this, I think, is a mistake. Schopenhauer ([1859] 1969, p. 104) called scepticism an 'impregnable' fortress from which 'the garrison can never

⁹ An analogous problem concerns how to assess whether a possible world is sufficiently 'nearby' to preclude safety. Both are instances of the 'generality' problem (Conee and Feldman 1998). I do not take the generality problem to be devastating for safety-theoretic epistemologies; see Williamson (2000, p. 100).

¹⁰ For an elaboration of this argument, see Srinivasan (2015).

¹¹ G. A. Cohen (2000) made a similar observation about the belief in the analytic–synthetic distinction.

¹² Sharon Street (2006, pp. 163–4 n.57) addresses the worry that her evolutionary debunking argument against moral realism is self-defeating by saying that there is widespread agreement about what our epistemic reasons are. See Srinivasan (2015) for a response.

sally forth'. In so far as we are untroubled by genealogical anxiety, we can simply leave the critical genealogist in his fortress. But for those already in the grip of genealogical anxiety, this is not a real option. For such people, the sceptic is not inside a fortress, but lurking in our own hearts. Perhaps the genealogical sceptic can provide me no compelling reason to think I do not know. But what positive reason do I have for thinking that I do know? In so far as my beliefs are in fact knowledge, the genealogical sceptic reminds me, it must be because they are formed on the basis of a special, knowledge-conferring mechanism—a specialness that does not characterize the methods used by those with different contingent formations. Put another way, if I am committed to the claim that my genealogically contingent beliefs are justified, it seems that I am *eo ipso* committed to the claim that I am the beneficiary of what we might call *good genealogical luck*. Thus the critical genealogist exercises a kind of *meta*-epistemic power: a power to reveal what we tacitly presume about ourselves in so far as we believe that our genealogically contingent beliefs are in fact knowledge.¹³ In order to not merely dismiss the genealogical sceptic but moreover explain why he is wrong, I must believe myself to be genealogically lucky.

There is no in-principle prohibition on thinking oneself genealogically lucky. On the basis of my reliable visual perception, I am able to know that I am in a lecture room. But this is only possible because I am luckily not a brain-in-a-vat. Even my claims to ordinary empirical knowledge appear to presuppose my genealogical luckiness. Consider another example. I know that the appearance of intelligent design in nature is just that: mere appearance. But I only know this because I was born well after Darwin taught us his theory of evolution by natural selection. William Paley, who died four years before Darwin would be born, was not so genealogically lucky, which is why Paley (falsely, but understandably) believed in intelligent design. There feels nothing odd in saying that I am genealogically lucky vis-à-vis the truth about intelligent design, whereas Paley was in this respect genealogically unlucky.

And yet it can feel—to at least some of us, some of the time—problematic to think of oneself as genealogically lucky in the cases of moral, theological or metaphysical belief. Perhaps this is because we

¹³ This is a *meta*-epistemic power because being in a position to justifiably believe that one's first-order belief is justified is not a condition on one's first-order belief being justified. To think otherwise leads to an endless regress of justificatory demands.

can be confident that Paley would have rejected intelligent design had he been exposed to all the relevant evidence, most importantly the explanatory power of Darwin's theory. By contrast, the Christian has little reason to think that he could persuade a Hindu or Muslim over to his view of things simply by offering more evidence—just as I have little reason to think that I could persuade a sincere Catholic theologian of the permissibility of homosexuality through argument alone. In these latter cases, there appears to be a kind of deep internal symmetry between my genealogical counterpart and myself. My counterpart and I can be equally apprised of the relevant, subjectively available evidence, equally sincere and diligent in our pursuit of the truth, and yet profoundly disagree.¹⁴ The difference between us lies in the fact that our different genealogies have endowed us with deeply opposed ways of seeing and interpreting the world.¹⁵ In such cases, I can have no non-circular reason for thinking that I am the lucky one and my counterpart unlucky.¹⁶ I can only say to myself: I believe that homosexuality is permissible, and indeed homosexuality is permissible, so I must be the genealogically lucky one.

None of this is to say that one cannot justifiably believe oneself genealogically lucky. Indeed, I take myself to know that I am genealogically lucky vis-à-vis my feminist commitments. But this is only a comfort to those who have not, in a moment of genealogical anxiety, already lost confidence in their beliefs. The moment one abandons a

¹⁴ I say 'subjectively available' because on some views of evidence, two internally symmetrical parties need not share the same evidence. For one party might *know* something that the other party does not know—for example, I know of many particular homosexual unions that they are morally valuable, which constitutes evidence not shared by my Catholic interlocutor. Only if evidence is understood in a subjectivist fashion must my genealogical counterpart and I share the relevant evidence. See Williamson (2000, ch. 9).

¹⁵ One can simply deny this, insisting that everyone can come to know the relevant truths regardless of their genealogy. On such a view, disagreement about the moral, theological, metaphysical, and other truths is just evidence of a failure to properly deliberate; any 'subjectively ideal' reasoner will come to the same conclusion about such matters. Alternatively, one might insist that disagreements about the moral, theological or metaphysical truths are merely *apparent*. Both responses deny the problem with which this paper is concerned, namely, the radical contingency of our representations.

¹⁶ One can press on the disanalogy between scientific and normative disagreement. I've said that I have reason to believe Paley would agree with me if given all the relevant evidence. But this is to ignore, as Kuhn taught us, the role of supra-evidential conversion in scientific theory change. It is also to ignore the possibility that I could offer the theologian more evidence by, for example, enlivening his capacity for empathy. Why then do I have a non-circular reason for thinking myself lucky in the former but not latter case? The question of whether one has an independent reason to think oneself genealogically lucky itself cannot be settled in a dialectically neutral way.

belief under genealogical attack, one will no longer be able to use it as a premiss in an argument to the effect that one is genealogically lucky vis-à-vis that belief (see also [Williamson 2000](#), ch. 8.)

It is also not much comfort to those who feel a certain *ethical* angst about thinking themselves genealogically lucky. It is one thing to counter the external-world sceptic by insisting that my brain-in-a-vat counterpart is simply unlucky—and another to counter the critical genealogist by insisting that my counterpart with a different historical or cultural formation is similarly unlucky. There are no brains-in-vats. But there do appear to be real people, equally intelligent, equally motivated by a concern for truth, equally sincere, who—because of their different historical and cultural formations—disagree with us. To think of oneself—or, more generally, one's particular community, sect, class, sex, culture, or historical moment—as genealogically lucky opens oneself up to accusations of chauvinism and hubris. Such accusations are not idle. They come from a recognition that claims to 'genealogical luckiness' can be used—and often have been used—to legitimate the domination of the putatively unlucky.

But it matters, I want to suggest, just who is taking themselves to be genealogically lucky. It is troubling when the evangelicals of 'Western' values use their putative genealogical luckiness as a justification to 'spread democracy' by tank or drone. It seems to me a different matter when black women insist that their subjugation as black women allows them to know something about the gendered and racialized structure of society that others are liable to miss (see also [Hartsock 1983](#)). Equally, should not the proletarian who sees exploitation where the capitalist sees only free exchange, consider himself, in virtue of his particular relationship to the means of production, the beneficiary of good genealogical luck (see also [Lukács \[1923\] 1971](#))? Perhaps the problem is not the belief in genealogical luckiness per se, but the tendency of precisely the wrong people to think themselves the lucky ones.

IV

Suppose that one refuses to insist on one's genealogical luckiness, but still wants to explain the wrongness of the genealogical critic's challenge. What then? One strategy is to endorse what we might call an *internalism* about the relevant objects of belief, according to

which there is no possibility of (subjectively ideal) beliefs about a given domain, whatever their contingent formation, swinging wildly apart from truths in that domain (see [Wright 1988](#)). This view is internalist in the sense that it insists on an ‘internal’ connection between subjectively well-formed beliefs in a domain and truth in that domain. It is thus compatible with a wide range of metaphysical views of the nature of that connection: mind-dependence, relativism, naturalism, and so on. What it is opposed to is the sort of strong objectivism that insists that even subjectively ideal beliefs in a domain can be false.¹⁷ By sacrificing strong objectivity about a domain, we can avoid the discomfort of saying that we alone are the ones luckily endowed with knowledge of it.

Such an internalist response to genealogical threats will be familiar from ethics (for example, [Street 2006](#)). But this basic strategy can also be taken up in metaphysics and theology. As I already mentioned, Goodman and Putnam both argue that what there is depends on our contingent conceptual schemes. For Goodman, rather than there being a single, mind-independent world to which all our representations answer, there are multiple worlds, each dependent for its existence on a different representational system. In so far as we are at home in multiple, conflicting representational schemata—in the world as described by physics, say, and the world as described by psychoanalysis—we live in multiple, incommensurable worlds. While this does not mean that ‘anything goes’ ontologically, it does mean that there is little point in debating who is genealogically lucky: the physicist or the psychoanalyst. Similarly, John Hick has argued that the main religious traditions all constitute epistemically legitimate ways of ‘conceiving, experiencing, and responding to’ ([Hick 1995](#), p. 149) what he calls ‘the Real’—that is, the transcendent divine reality ([Hick 1987, 1989](#)). Hick in effect argues that the claims of different religions are true relative to different, historically and culturally contingent, ways of experiencing the divine. This in turn ensures that massive error about religious matters is not possible, and critical genealogies of credal beliefs lose their bite.

Broadly speaking, then, we have two general ways of countering the critical genealogist. On one hand, we can maintain a view of the relevant truths according to which it is possible for a subjectively ideal reasoner to be massively in error about those truths, insisting

¹⁷ See footnote 15 above.

that it is our good genealogical fortune that puts us, but not our shadow-selves, in touch with those truths. On the other hand, we can reject the possibility of subjectively ideal reasoners being massively in error about the relevant truths—and with it, reject the very idea that only one of us, me or my shadow-self, can be lucky enough to grasp them.

A third and distinct strategy for countering the critical genealogist is to deny the problem altogether.¹⁸ This was the strategy advocated by Williams in his famous essay, ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’ (2000). Here Williams criticizes Richard Rorty for indulging what Williams saw as an unnecessary anxiety about the contingency of our moral and political world-views. Rorty’s own solution was an ironic oscillation, between a steadfast, first-order commitment to liberal principles, and a higher-order recognition of their radical contingency (Rorty 1989). Williams was unimpressed by this. ‘The supposed problem’ he wrote:

comes from the idea that a vindictory history of our outlook is what we would really like to have, and the discovery that liberalism, in particular (but the same is true of any outlook), has the kind of contingent history that it does have is a disappointment, which leaves us with at best a second best. But . . . why should we think that? Precisely because we are not unencumbered intelligences selecting in principle among all possible outlooks, 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. We are no less contingently formed than the outlook is, and the formation is significantly the same. (Williams 2000, p. 490–1)

Williams is surely right that there we are not ‘unencumbered intelligences’. As philosophers like to say, we must start ‘from where we are’. But to say that we must start from where we are is not to say that we must end up there.¹⁹ That would be to convert an observation of our human finitude into a normative vindication of conservatism. Perhaps it is true for many of us that the upending of our moral and psychic outlooks is psychically impossible. But for generations of radical political theorists and actors, such ideological upending has been not only possible, but necessary.

¹⁸ On other ways of denying the problem, see footnote 15.

¹⁹ A point recognized by Williams.

V

This takes me to my final theme, which is the relationship between genealogy and radical politics. For some critical genealogists, the point of critical genealogy is not merely to call into question the epistemic standing of our representations, but moreover to liberate us, practically, from their grip. For the Frankfurt School theorists, for example, ideology critique—which might be thought of as a kind of critical genealogy, in my wide sense of it—has a dual epistemic and practical character: emancipating us from the grip of bourgeois ideology precisely by revealing to us its deficient epistemic status (Geuss 1981). For other thinkers, the practical power of critical genealogy does not appear to hinge on anything epistemological. Foucault is a paradigm. With Marx and the Frankfurt School in mind, Foucault distinguishes his genealogical method from ‘ideology critique’, meaning that he is not concerned with the epistemic standing of the representations he genealogizes (Fraser 1981). What then is Foucault interested in? To put it no doubt too simply, Foucault is interested in what our representational systems *do*: which practices they emerge from and help sustain, how they are mobilized by power, what (and whom) they bring into existence, and which possibilities they foreclose.²⁰

In this, Foucault is self-consciously a follower of Nietzsche. In the *Genealogy of Morality* ([1887] 2007), Nietzsche tells us that our modern system of morality—a system that valorizes kindness, equality and other values of the ‘herd’—has its true origins, not in human goodness or an omnibenevolent divine, but in a complicated and ugly interplay of forces: the *ressentiment* of the slave class against their masters, the paying of debts through the extraction of pain, and the will to power of the priestly caste. Some readers of Nietzsche see the *Genealogy* as akin to the other critical genealogies I have so far been discussing. On this reading, favoured by, for example, Peter Kail (2011), Nietzsche—by revealing the true origins of our moral beliefs and concepts—calls into question their ability to limn the contours of moral reality. On Raymond Geuss’s distinct but related reading, the point of Nietzsche’s genealogy is to reveal that common beliefs about where Christian values come from are false (Geuss

²⁰ I don’t mean to suggest that Foucault is solely interested in our representations. As he repeatedly insists, power operates through our practices.

1994, pp. 276ff.; cf. Kaufmann 1950). This genealogical revelation, Geuss claims, will have the predictable effect of undermining the Christian's belief in his own values, in turn destabilizing Christian forms of life. For both Geuss and Kail, the force of the *Genealogy* relies on an epistemic revelation—of falsity, unreliability, or inconsistency. But I want to offer a different way of reading Nietzsche's genealogy, according to which Nietzsche is primarily interested, not in whether our representations are in good epistemic standing, but, like Foucault, in what our representations do—and in what we might do with them. Indeed, I want to offer a way of reading Nietzsche that sees him as exemplifying a distinctive strand of critical genealogical thinking, which a focus on the epistemic force of critical genealogies risks obscuring.²¹

Nietzsche makes clear, in the *Genealogy* and elsewhere, that modern morality has the effect of controlling and neutering the instincts of 'higher men', those individuals capable of the grandest reaches of human genius.²² Nietzsche moreover suggests that these effects explain the emergence and continued grip of bourgeois morality; it is thus the hidden *function* of modern morality to oppress 'higher men'—a function that can only be uncovered through an examination of how that morality emerged, developed, and ascended to dominance.²³ Meanwhile, Nietzsche appears largely unbothered by the question of whether our moral beliefs are true or our moral concepts apt. Indeed, a fascination with epistemic error characterizes, Nietzsche says, the 'English psychologists' from whom he distances himself at the start of the *Genealogy* (§I.3). In his relative indifference to the epistemic merits of our representations, and concern for their oppressive function,²⁴ Nietzsche is not only emblematic of a strand of critical genealogical thinking that includes Foucault, but also, I want to suggest, a range of theorists of politics: critics of liberalism such as Charles Mills and Uday Mehta; critics of Eurocentrism

²¹ For a distinct non-epistemic account of genealogy, see David Owen (2002).

²² See Leiter (2002). The idea that genealogy has the power to reveal (valuable) function is a common theme in discussions of vindicatory genealogies (Craig 1990; Williams 2002; Queloz).

²³ This reading might be thought to ignore Nietzsche's warning (in §II.12 of the *Genealogy*) not to mistake the historical function of something for its current function. When I say that a genealogy can reveal a representation's function, I mean its *current* function. A genealogy traces descent: it tells us not only how a representation was first introduced, but why it survived and flourished from that originary moment to now.

²⁴ I use the term 'oppression' to include not only repressive effects, but also the 'productive' effects that Foucault associates with modern power and MacKinnon with male power.

such as Edward Said and Chandra Mohanty; feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Catharine MacKinnon and Judith Butler; and intellectual historians such as Quentin Skinner and Samuel Moyn. The crucial question for such critical genealogists is not are our representations true, but what do our representations do? What practices and forms of life do they help sustain, what sort of person do they help construct, and whose power do they help entrench?

The idea that a representation should be thought of in terms of what it does—its function—rather than its epistemic merits—its truth or aptness—has an uneasy place in analytic philosophy. Philosophers often see discussions of oppressive function as a kind of historicist *non sequitur*. The historian observes that a certain representation co-originated with or has consistently gone hand in hand with—and thus plausibly has the function of producing—certain patterns of domination. The philosopher responds that that there is no necessary or conceptual connection between the representation and its oppressive effects: that such effects are just issues of ‘implementation’ that tell us little of interest about the normative standing of the representation. Consider, for example, John Tasioulas’s response to Samuel Moyn’s critical genealogy of human rights. By tracing the emergence of human rights discourse to the collapse of the post-war order of the 1970s, Moyn suggests that human rights have had the function of legitimating Western intervention in a post-colonial era (Moyn 2010), while simultaneously allowing for massive growth in global inequality via its focus on sufficiency over equality (Moyn 2018). Tasioulas objects to Moyn’s holding human rights

responsible for doing, or failing to do, this or that. One might with no less cogency say that justice, equality, fairness, mercy and love have not ‘done enough’ to transform the world as it is ... [H]owever, this way of speaking conflates human rights, understood as genuine normative demands, and the fallible practical measures through which we seek ... to fulfil them. (Tasioulas 2018, p. 93)

But Moyn is presumably not holding the discourse of human rights responsible for anything. His point rather is that the discourse of human rights serves the function of allowing powerful agents to maintain certain forms of political domination while purporting to serve the interests of justice. This is what partially explains the

extraordinary success of human rights discourse. The connection that Moyn draws between human rights and inequality is not one of conceptual necessity, but neither is it one of mere contingency. The proposed connection is functional. Whatever the noble intentions of its users, the ascendancy of *human rights* as a normative vocabulary has to do with its ability to legitimate the political status quo.²⁵ The question for us, as Moyn sees it, is how to expand our normative repertoire such that we stop thinking of human rights as the whole of global justice.

Moyn's ambition is not merely to diagnose our attachment to human rights, but moreover to enliven us to what might be possible for our relationship to them. As Skinner says, a history of our representations can give us a 'broader sense of possibility', one that allows us to 'stand back from the intellectual commitments that we have inherited and ask ourselves in a new spirit of enquiry what we should think of them' (Skinner 1998, pp. 116–17).²⁶ This is surely right. But it is tempting to think that, having taken us so far—having revealed to us the problematic function played by our representations, and reminded us of their contingency—the critical genealogist must be silent. On the question of how to intervene in our representations, genealogy—given its retrospective and diagnostic nature—surely has nothing to say. But this, I want to suggest, need not be so.

In the *Genealogy* (§I.I4), Nietzsche narrates a conversation with someone who has agreed 'to have a little look down into the secret of how *ideals are fabricated* on this earth'. His interlocutor reports back:

I think people are telling lies; a sugary mildness clings to every sound. Lies are turning weakness into an *accomplishment* . . . and impotence which doesn't retaliate is being turned into 'goodness'; timid baseness is being turned into 'humility'; submission to people one hates is being

²⁵ Functional explanations are teleological: they explain means in terms of ends. Barring backwards causation, how could the effects of a representation explain the existence of that representation? The puzzle is dissolved in cases where representations are intentionally brought into use because of their effects. Here functional talk is elliptical for intentional talk. Things are thornier in cases in which representations were not intentionally introduced to play a particular function. One solution is to see such functional talk as elliptical for talk of non-intentional selection, in just the same way that we can understand talk of biological function as being elliptical for evolutionary explanations (Neander 1991). What the selection mechanism(s) might be in the social as opposed to biological sphere is a complex issue, one that I cannot go into here (cf. Rosen 1996).

²⁶ See also Foucault (1984). Often this point is made like this: critical genealogies show us that what we thought *natural* is really contingent (for example, Fisher 2012, p. 17). But, as Shulamith Firestone ([1970] 2015) reminds us, we must not conflate the natural with the necessary.

turned into ‘obedience’ ... The inoffensiveness of the weakling, the very cowardice with which he is richly endowed ... are all given good names such as ‘patience’ ... not-being-able-to-take-revenge is called not-*wanting-to-take-revenge* ... But enough! enough! I can’t bear it any longer ... This workshop where *ideals are fabricated*—it seems to me just to stink of lies ... (Nietzsche [1887] 2007, §I.14)

Nietzsche’s interlocutor is here witnessing a pantomime of the slave revolt in morality. He is also witnessing, as Skinner tells us, the workings of an ancient rhetorical strategy, what Quintilian calls *paradiastole*, or *rhetorical redescription*. This is the strategy whereby, Skinner explains, one replaces ‘a given evaluative description with a rival term that serves to picture the action no less plausibly, but serves at the same time to place it in a contrasting moral light’ (Skinner 2002, p. 183).

I want to suggest that Nietzsche here satirizes *paradiastole* in order to call our attention to the basic mechanism by which the slave revolt in morality was achieved: to remind us that the slave revolt was not a matter of sheer contingency, but a product of human artifice and skill. The slave revolt involved a conscious attempt to change our representational practices: the replacement of the good/bad dichotomy with the evil/good dichotomy, and the recasting of virtues as vices, and vices as virtues. Later in the same passage, Nietzsche describes the ‘black magicians who can turn anything black into whiteness, milk and innocence’ as having performed the ‘boldest, subtlest, most ingenious and mendacious stunt’ (§I.14). The slave revolt is a ‘mendacious stunt’, but one that impresses Nietzsche: it is a piece of ‘black magic’ that turns lies into truth. It is in this sense that the *Genealogy* is, as Nietzsche retrospectively says of it in *Ecce Homo*, a merely ‘preparatory’ work for the revaluation of values (Nietzsche [1888] 1967). A full revaluation will not merely diagnose the oppressive function of our values, thereby prompting the ‘higher men’ to rebel against them, but will moreover *revalue* them, transforming them anew. For it is one thing to reveal that morality has the function of harming the strong, and another still to make the strong good once more. Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, by revealing the means by which modern morality came into being, prepares the ground for the ‘reverse experiment’ and ‘*redemption* of this reality’ that should, Nietzsche says, ‘be possible *in principle*’ for a ‘creative spirit’ of ‘sufficient strength’ (Nietzsche [1887] 2007, §II.24).

To read the *Genealogy* this way is to read it as a guide to what I want to call *worldmaking*:²⁷ the transformation of the world through a transformation of our representational practices. A critical genealogy is a guide to worldmaking when it not only diagnoses our representations in terms of the oppressive function they serve, but moreover shows us the role that agential powers—individuals, groups and institutions—have played in the emergence and continued dominance of those representations. For then we might be able to exercise our own agential powers to make our representations, and thus our world, anew.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to worldmake. Manifestly, aspects of the social world are causally dependent on how we represent them. For example, the widespread belief in the submissiveness of women, and the availability of the concept *prostitute*, have profound effects on the treatment and behaviour of women and sex workers. One sort of worldmaking attempts to exploit such causal dependencies to alter worldly states of affairs—by, for example, exposing women’s submissiveness as a fiction, or displacing *prostitute* with *sex worker*.²⁸ More controversially, our representations can also have *constitutive* effects, bringing into existence new things or making things true. Thus, men’s belief and expectation that women are submissive can *make* women submissive (Langton 2009), and the introduction of the concept *prostitute* can bring into existence a new sort of person—the prostitute—whose social role it is to be exploited by men, marginalized by the law, and condemned by society (see Foucault [1961] 2006; Searle 1995; Hacking 2000). A second sort of worldmaking exploits these constitutive connections in order to change what is true and what (and who) exists.²⁹

In a crucial passage of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche describes how representations come to exercise their functional roles:

[E]very purpose and use is just a *sign* that the will to power has achieved mastery over something less powerful, and has impressed upon its own idea of a use function; and the whole history of a ‘thing’,

²⁷ I borrow the term from Goodman (1978), though my use differs from his.

²⁸ Once prostitutes are reclassified as *workers*, questions like ‘Would women do this if they weren’t being paid?’ become inappropriate, and questions like ‘Are their labour rights protected?’ become appropriate. On the significance of this representational shift, see Smith and Mac (2018).

²⁹ The former conception of worldmaking will be more congenial to those of a materialist bent, including orthodox Marxists. The latter will be more congenial to those who believe, following Foucault, in the ‘productive’ power of discourse.

an organ, a tradition can to this extent be a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations [This] runs counter to just that prevailing ... fashion which would much rather come to terms with absolute randomness ... than the theory that a *power-will* is acted out in all that happens ... (Nietzsche [1887] 2007, §II.12)

The purpose of Nietzsche's genealogy is not the revelation of sheer contingency or 'absolute randomness'. Its purpose is to show us the dependency of the world on how we represent it, and that how we represent it is a matter of which of the various 'interpretations and adaptations' successfully vied for domination. In revealing this, Nietzsche's genealogy is a reminder—at least for those of us who are sufficiently strong—of our worldmaking power. But it is also a reminder of the limits on that power. Simply changing one's own local representations hardly suffices to worldmake. One's proposed redescription must vie for uptake against the dominant mode of representation.³⁰ This means it must be taken up by the very people whose interests will be undermined if the redescription does in fact take hold: the slave revolt in morality required not only that the slaves believed themselves to be good, but also that the masters believed themselves to be evil. Similar things could be said of the gay rights campaign to make gay marriage, and of the feminist campaign to make marital rape, conceptual possibilities. Such representational interventions require not only the gifts of judgement and rhetoric, but also of good luck. Their success is beholden to the future. Whether, for example, the legal and social recognition of gay marriage and marital rape will continue to serve the liberation of gay people and women depends on the purposes to which these concepts are put.³¹ It is, after all, the peculiar genius of systems of domination—patriarchy, capitalism, racism—that they are able to reconstitute themselves materially under new representational orders. These systems are gifted at transforming attempts at worldmaking into acts of *mere* redescription.³²

³⁰ For a more local vision of successful worldmaking, involving counter-dominant uses of the word 'woman', see [Bettcher \(2014\)](#).

³¹ The worry that the recognition of gay marriage will ultimately bolster heteronormativity is familiar. For suspicions about the liberatory effects of the recognition of marital rape, see [MacKinnon \(1983\)](#), p. 648.

³² In other words, I want to reject an idealistic vision of worldmaking on which representational interventions necessarily result in worldly changes. I also want to resist idealism in a further sense: worldmaking is not the sole province of 'high' intellectual actors. Resistance

Nietzsche often railed against the limits of his worldmaking powers. He complained of not being understood, and of selling so few books. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* begins with Nietzsche's title character stepping out of a cave and asking what the sun would be if not for those on whom it shines. After attempting and failing to take his message to the world, Zarathustra returns, at the book's close, to his cave once more. It is a poignant image of a failed worldmaker.³³ It also speaks to the problems with Nietzsche's profoundly individualistic vision of worldmaking.

VI

For an alternative vision of worldmaking, we should turn towards those whom Nietzsche would presumably despise: the participants of the various slave revolts still underway.³⁴ '[M]ale power creates the reality of the world', writes MacKinnon, and it is the task of feminism to 'expose it as specifically male for the first time'. She goes on:

For example, men say all women are whores; feminism observes that men have the power to make prostitution women's definitive condition . . . Men say women desire to be degraded; feminism sees female masochism as the ultimate success of male supremacy and puzzle (and marvel) over its failures. (MacKinnon 1989, p. 125)

Feminism begins, for MacKinnon, with a revelation that our sexual reality—and for MacKinnon, that means the whole of our social and political realities—has its origin in male power. Male power is not merely the power to dictate the dominant representational mode, but also the power to constitute the world; thus male power 'makes women (as it were) and so . . . makes true . . . who women "are"' (MacKinnon 1989, p. 122, italics added). MacKinnon's account of rape is a paradigm of her genealogizing approach. While

to dominant modes of representation by marginalized groups is a paradigm of collective worldmaking. Worldmaking also need not be verbal: Mamie Till's decision to publicly display the dead body of her son, in a bid to reclassify black boys as vulnerable children rather than violent threats, is a paradigm. Thanks to Shatema Threadcraft for prompting me to think about this last case.

³³ Thanks to James Kreines for this reading.

³⁴ As the discussion of Nietzsche should make clear, worldmaking is not a proprietary practice of the left. Indeed, one might worry that the most successful worldmakers of our current moment are on the right.

our legal and moral understandings of rape purport to be products of a gender-neutral objectivity, she argues, they in fact find their origin in male power: the ‘law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women’ (MacKinnon 1983, p. 644). This is why the crime of rape centres on penetration (the essence of sex for heterosexual men), is presumed to be committed by violent (and non-white) strangers (that is, rape is the contrary of ‘normal’ men’s sexual activities), and defined by the *mens rea* standard (‘this reflects men’s experience that women they know meaningfully consent to sex with them ... But *women* experience rape most often by men we know’—MacKinnon 1983, pp. 648–9). In turn, this male understanding of rape makes women ‘rapeable’, not only in the sense of making women more susceptible to rape, but also making them creatures whose social function is to be raped (1983, p. 651). This is one way in which our representations, for MacKinnon, make the world: not only by affecting how we interact with it, but by altering the normative significance of those within it (see also Searle 1995).

In a paradiastolic gesture more than worthy of Nietzsche, MacKinnon tells us that feminism

claims the voice of women’s silence, the sexuality of women’s eroticized desexualization, the fullness of ‘lack’, the centrality of women’s marginality and exclusion, the public nature of privacy, the presence of women’s absence. This approach ... is neither materialist nor idealist; it is feminist. (MacKinnon 1989, p. 117)

Feminism, for MacKinnon, does not consist in mere diagnosis. It redescribes the male-created world for itself, in a way that is at once true to reality, resisting an idealistic flight from it, and transformative of it, resisting a materialistic capitulation to it. This redescription is achieved through feminism’s proprietary method: not the heroic acts of individual men, but women’s collective acts of consciousness-raising. Thus, MacKinnon writes, ‘the struggle for consciousness is a struggle for *world*’ (1989, p. 115, italics added).

A common complaint advanced against MacKinnon (and likewise Nietzsche and Foucault) is that her theory lacks the resources to explain the possibility of the very political transformation she wishes to effect.³⁵ If all is male power—or the will to power (Nietzsche) or

³⁵ This problem is sometimes thought endemic to genealogy, with genealogy defined as a method that abjures normative foundations. But in my wide sense of ‘genealogy’, the problem is not endemic.

discursive power (Foucault)—then on what foundation can we presume to worldmake? We cannot worldmake on the promise of greater truth, for that is to return us to an epistemic conception of genealogy. Can we worldmake on the promise of greater goodness—on the grounds that our proposed representations will conduce to a more just world? Such pragmatism is increasingly attractive to many philosophers.³⁶ But it will not suit MacKinnon, who resists appeal to transcendent normative standards as all too immanently male. MacKinnon's answer to the problem appears to be its embrace:

Feminism criticizes this male totality without an account of our capacity to do so or to imagine or realize a more whole truth. Feminism affirms women's point of view by revealing, criticizing, and explaining its impossibility. This is not a dialectical paradox. It is a methodological expression of women's situation ... Why can women know that this—life as we have known it—is not all, not enough, not ours, not just? (MacKinnon 1983, p. 637)

The answer to how feminist worldmaking is possible is not something, it seems, that can (yet) be said: feminism can offer no account of its possibility, because male power makes its own overthrow unspeakable.³⁷ Indeed, it is only in describing its impossibility—in describing the totality of male power—that feminist consciousness comes into being. (This is why, for MacKinnon, feminist worldmaking cannot be just the mirror image of male worldmaking. It is also why critics are wrong to say that MacKinnon sees women as mere victims.) Male power not only constitutes reality, but moreover makes itself the standard of reality: to see things objectively *is* to see things as men see them. Thus to genealogize the world as a product of male power is already to worldmake. Genealogy and worldmaking, for MacKinnon, are one and the same.

VII

Many will resist MacKinnon's account of feminist worldmaking, wishing to ground worldmaking in a suitably representation-

³⁶ See, for example, Haslanger (2000), Burgess and Plunkett (2013a, 2013b).

³⁷ I read Judith Butler as offering a kindred response to the 'normativity problem', one that locates the ethical in the ineffable (Butler 2015).

independent reality. But we might worry that such a view can suffer from a different sort of problem, practical rather than theoretical. Successful representational interventions have a Janus-faced structure: they must at once *picture the world right*, as it is currently constituted, and yet also *picture it anew*, as one would have it be. A representational intervention—the introduction of a new concept (*sexual harassment, compulsory heterosexuality*), or the application of an old universal to a new particular (*silencing* to what pornography does to women, *rape* to forced marital sex)—must strike a fine balance between familiarity and departure. Too familiar, and it will be a recapitulation of what came before; too strange, and it will be unintelligible. In this, representational interventions are like all creative acts. And, as with other creative acts, it is not clear that worldmaking is best carried out by those who self-consciously aim to achieve certain effects or advance certain principles. Successful worldmakers often appear to be people (we might call them moral prophets) who simply *see* the world as no one else (yet) sees it. Such people are truth-makers who speak and act as truth-tellers: who speak and act as if they are genealogically lucky. Often such people—MacKinnon is an example par excellence—can reflect on just what it is they are up to when they do politics. But they then return to prophecy: to truth-telling. Thus for MacKinnon the world just is constituted by male power, even as she knows that to insist on this is to redescribe the world in terms favoured by radical feminism.

This complicates the distinction I drew earlier, between those critical genealogists who are concerned with the epistemic flaws of our representations and those who are interested in directly practical questions, of what our representations do and what we might do we with them. For amongst the critical genealogists of the second camp we find figures like MacKinnon, whose own worldmaking power is governed, not by a self-conscious pragmatism about representational change, but by an insistence on describing the world as she sees it. In offering an account of the power of critical genealogy, I have been trying to answer the question of why history matters for philosophy. One thing history might show us is that it is the prophets, and not the mere pragmatists, who are the most powerful worldmakers.³⁸

³⁸ My thanks to Jo Wolff, Guy Longworth and the Aristotelian Society for their invitation to give this paper. The writing of this paper was supported by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship. Material from it was presented at the Yale Legal Theory Workshop, the Yale Humanities Colloquium, the NYU Mind and Language Seminar, the NYU Colloquium in

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Legal, Social and Political Philosophy, the University of Chicago Practical Philosophy Workshop, and the University of Basel. My thanks to the organizers, commentators and attendees of those events, especially Scott Shapiro, Tony Kronman, Bryan Garsten, Sam Moyn, Crispin Wright, Sharon Street, Samuel Scheffler, Jeremy Waldron, Matthieu Queloz and Rebekka Hufendiek, as well as to participants in seminars I have taught on this material at Oxford and UCL. For discussion of these issues, my deepest thanks to Julian Bacharach, Daniela Dover, John Hawthorne, Paul Lodge, Sophie Smith, Robert Simpson and Timothy Williamson.

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