

Genealogy of Belief

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Week 8: Genealogy, ethics and tradition

http://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Genealogy_of_Belief.html

1. Taxonomy of responses to the threat of genealogy:

Question: how is our knowledge [of the mind-independent facts about X] compatible with the radical genealogical contingency of our [X-]beliefs? *Three answers:*

(a) *Externalism:* it's ok, because we (luckily) get onto the world as it really is...though if we were in the bad case things wouldn't be ok

- Williamson, R. Millikan, B. Williams (science), Parfit (ethics)

(b) *Internalism:* it's ok, because there's a constitutive connection between our [X] beliefs and the [X] truths

- Sharon Street: Humean constructivism about ethics
- B. Williams (ethics), Brandom (everything)

...*Transcendental internalism:* at the immanent level it's ok, but [we are shown that] at the transcendent level it's not ok

- Kant, Putnam: transcendental idealism
- A. Moore: we are *shown* that TI is true, though it's false

(c) *Radical perspectivalism:* it's not ok

- Rorty, Nietzsche, Derrida, MacKinnon

2. Rorty and irony

The *ironist* is someone who (i) has radical doubts about her final vocabulary b/c she has been impressed by other 'final vocabularies', (ii) thinks she can't give a satisfactory argument for/against her final vocabulary, (iii) when philosophising, doesn't think her vocabulary is closer to reality than others.

The *liberal ironist* is someone who is committed to liberal values but who thinks that the liberal vocabulary is not superior to any other, that it was contingently given to her, that her acceptance of it is provisional, &c.

The liberal ironist sees the history of political change as not a history of reason unfolding, but as merely a history of *change*.

3. Williams and *our* outlook

As discussed, Williams believes in the possibility of an *absolute conception* – a description of the world that can be had from any perspective, and that can explain how any two local descriptions are at once true – but does not think that ethics features in it.

Why not? Because any explanation of how claims in two incompatible ethical schemes (e.g. honour code vs liberalism) can both be true will only *indirectly* endorse those claims, but the same isn't true of science.

How convincing is this?:

- Putnam: no fact/value distinction in ethics or in *science*
- Moore's rehabilitation: 'physics' in a stipulative sense

For Williams, Rortyan irony is thus a response to a non-problem:

[O]nce one goes far enough in recognizing contingency, the problem to which irony is supposed to provide the answer does not arise at all... The supposed problem 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, once again, 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. We and our outlook are not simply in the same place at the same time. If we really understand this, deeply understand it, we can be free of what is indeed another scientific illusion, that it is our job as rational agents to search for, or at least move as best we can towards, a system of political and ethical ideas which would be the best from an absolute point of view, a point of view that was free of contingent historical perspective (Williams 2000, 490-1).

Pace Rorty, there is no problem of ethical “reflection *versus* commitment”, or “historicist weariness and alienation” from ethics (ibid 490). All three of the following are compatible: (1) acting and arguing within our ethical framework, (2) philosophically reflecting on ‘common sense’, (3) attending to the historical conditions of our ethical framework:

If there is a difficulty in combining the third of these activities with the first two, it is the difficulty of thinking about two things at once, not a problem in consistently taking both of them seriously (ibid 491).

Williams, unlike Rorty, doesn’t just exhort us to return to our ordinary ethical practice, but tells us that this practice is knowledge-conducive, and compatible with consciousness of its genealogical contingency. Is it?

Is it really easy as that? Can we at once take certain moral truths (e.g. the equality of persons) as given for us and historicise that (contingent) givenness – while still taking ourselves to *know* those truths?

4. Brandom on Hegelian magnanimity

“Genealogy in its most radical form seeks to dispel the *illusion* of reason”, revealing putative reasons to be mere “blind causes”.

But global genealogical debunking arguments suffer from “semantic naïveté”, the view that the *contents* of our judgments can be sharply distinguished from the normative relations that govern our judgments.

On the Kantian view, our concepts are determined at the transcendent level, and merely applied at the immanent level. But this is implausible (and incoherent?)

The Hegelian response: we at once determine and apply our concepts through a collective, social process whereby the universals and particulars (e.g. the concept ‘bachelor’, bachelors) shape each other. In this process, each individual shows his responsibility to others, who in turn hold him responsible (e.g. ‘John is a bachelor’ → John is unwed). This process creates determinate (but socially constructed) meanings.

Importantly, this process is *diachronic*, unfolding through history. (Hegel takes what Kant puts in the transcendental ‘realm’ and historicises it.)

Global debunkers attempt to dissolve the normative relations between our beliefs whilst maintaining that they are *beliefs* (i.e. have content); this is self-defeating.

Rationality is that which gives ‘contingency the form of necessity’ (15). Reason observes contingency and retroactively *describes* it normatively, as following a rule.

Prime examples: Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, common law, T.S. Eliot on artistic innovation.

Question 1: What distinguishes Brandom’s Hegel (Bregel?) from Rorty? Bregel identifies *reason* with the re-description that Rorty thinks of as being ‘merely’ creative (and gets along with it: truth, knowledge, progress)

Question 2: Is Hegel’s argument any less incoherent than Kant’s? Has he really avoided a form of self-contradictory (historicist) transcendentalism? (‘This [atom] would have been an atom regardless’; ‘this [atom] wouldn’t have been an atom if we hadn’t called it so’)

Should we perhaps think of the *Phenomenology* as *showing* us something about the (historically and socially conditioned) grounds of meaning and reason – that is, as nonsense?

5. In the service of ethics

Question: which of these outlooks best serves ethics?

Externalism: so long as we’re in the good case, genealogy is irrelevant. Ethics is to be done like science: we seek empirical adequacy and elegance and hope for convergence. It’s possible to be radically wrong.

- Leaves open room for radical ethical innovation
- Unsavoury: condemns most people to wrongness (“the essence of fascism in its various forms” – R. Williams 2014, 193).

Internalism: We can’t be radically wrong in ethics. Genealogy might help us to make sense of how we ended up where we are (Williams), or as inspiration and grounds for moral innovation (Brandom).

- Vindicates most people as not in the wrong
- How much room does it really leave for ethical innovation?

Radical Perspectivalism: Right and wrong doesn't come into it; all there is the free actions of creative interpreters.

- Plenty of room for ethical innovation...but on what grounds? (Mere) preference?
- Is this a self-conception we can really get on with?

Transcendental internalism: [we are shown that] the world is as we choose to disclose it to ourselves, and so we can disclose it ethically

- Ethical life is then a matter of having a certain kind of *experience* of the world, so not readily available as a discursive object, or to everyone

Debates in meta-ethics often take this form: 'which of these outlooks best serves ethics?' Feminists, for example, divide over the importance of realist meta-conceptions 'for' feminism:

Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it (Mackinnon 1987, 50)

The insistence on the localness of all norms of judgement renders postmodernism incapable of sustaining ordinary judgements, such as the judgement that some forms of social organization are plain unjust, or that some beliefs are plain false. The question whether any particular critical judgement is reasonable cannot depend on the 'agreement' of those who happen to be one's interlocutors – their interests may be served very nicely by the discursive status quo...Suppose someone protests 'Equal pay for equal work!', or 'Slavery is wrong!'. And suppose the protest is met with a shrug of cynical insouciance from the powers that be. Postmodernism is unfit to characterize that response as unreasonable, or unjustified, or even inappropriate, for who is to say which 'language game' the authorities may provisionally have 'agreed' to play? (Fricker 2001, 151)

But how should we make sense of such a debate except as a psychological, sociological and political debate – that is, a debate about what *works*, for particular individuals in particular contexts?

Of course, anti-realism won't 'work' for the realist philosopher, but that is a matter of personality, not universal truth.

7. Works cited

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