



## What is Genealogy?

**Mark Bevir**

*Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, USA*  
*mbevir@berkeley.edu*

---

### Abstract

This paper offers a theory of genealogy, explaining its rise in the nineteenth century, its epistemic commitments, its nature as critique, and its place in the work of Nietzsche and Foucault. The crux of the theory is recognition of genealogy as an expression of a radical historicism, rejecting both appeals to transcendental truths and principles of unity or progress in history, and embracing nominalism, contingency, and contestability. In this view, genealogies are committed to the truth of radical historicism and, perhaps more provisionally, the truth of their own empirical content. Similarly, genealogies operate as denaturalizing critiques of ideas and practices that hide the contingency of human life behind formal ahistorical or developmental perspectives.

### Keywords

genealogy, historicism, critique, Nietzsche, Foucault

This issue of the *Journal of the Philosophy of History* explores genealogy. A genealogy is a historical narrative that explains an aspect of human life by showing how it came into being. The narratives may be more or less grounded in facts or more or less speculative, but they are always historical. Of course the word genealogy may be used in quite other ways. Nonetheless, the title of this journal provides a justification for our treating

---

### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Mark Bevir is Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. His recent publications include *New Labour: A Critique* (Routledge, 2005); *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); and, with R.A.W. Rhodes, both *Governance Stories* (Routledge, 2006), and *Interpreting British Governance* (Routledge, 2003).

genealogy as connected to historicism. Genealogy as historical narrative may have no clear origin, but it is associated primarily with Friedrich Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* and more recently Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. For Nietzsche and Foucault, genealogy serves a critical purpose, exposing the contingent and "shameful" origins of cherished ideas and entrenched practices.

A good theory of genealogy should fulfill several criteria. First, it should explain why genealogy rose to prominence in the nineteenth century. Second, it should include a plausible account of the implicit epistemic commitments typically made by genealogies. Third, it should enable us to understand how genealogies may act as critiques. Fourth, it should cover the leading self-proclaimed examples of genealogies offered by Nietzsche and Foucault, and ideally it should do so in a way that distinguishes their genealogies from the rest of their writings. Equally, however, a good theory of genealogy should avoid giving the impression of definitive precision. Genealogy is a vague and general concept, and a theory of genealogy should recognize this generality by leaving room for debate about the several themes it highlights.

Some readers may doubt the wisdom of searching for a theory of genealogy. The humanities and social sciences are awash with genealogies. Many of the authors cloak their genealogies in pious invocations of Foucault and critique, without paying attention to philosophical questions about the nature of their critiques and the commitments that these entail. Sometimes they even treat philosophical questions as irrelevant, apparently under the illusion that it is enough to define genealogy as an inherently critical mode of inquiry that avoids all substantive commitments of its own. Unfortunately, genealogists themselves have thereby enabled their detractors to sidestep particular genealogies and to deny the coherence of a genealogical stance. The targets of particular genealogies now sidestep them simply by allowing that their beliefs and practices have contingent and perhaps unsavory origins but adding that these origins do not make the beliefs and practices any less viable.<sup>1</sup> Philosophers commonly reject a broader genealogical stance on the grounds that it demands substantive allegiances of the very kind that it precludes.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See the curt defense of liberalism irrespective of its entanglements with power in J. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Eg. A. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and*

This essay stands in sharp contrast to pious but empty invocations of genealogy as inherently critical. It offers a robust philosophical account of genealogy that concentrates on its relation to radical historicism to suggest what epistemic commitments it entails and how it functions as critique. The task is to provide an account of the philosophy of genealogy so as to rescue it from both its pious adherents and its detractors. The essays that follow also pursue this task. They helped inspire my treatment of the themes of historicism, truth, and critique, as well as the work of Nietzsche and Foucault. In their varied treatments of these themes, moreover, they illustrate the fact that a general theory of genealogy can leave plenty of room for discussions and debates.

### Radical Historicism

Genealogy arose in the context of nineteenth century historicism. Of course, genealogy has earlier precursors, notably in David Hume's speculative account of the psychological origins of morality in customs and habits. Yet, Nietzsche's genealogies mark a clear break with such precursors.<sup>3</sup> It might appear that this break is a matter of critique. But actually Hume used his approach to critical effect in, for example, his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* where Philo presents religion as arising out of the states of terror that accompany depression and illness.<sup>4</sup> What marks Nietzsche apart is the radical, thoroughgoing nature of his historicism.

Historicist modes of reasoning were commonplace throughout the nineteenth century. An emphasis on the organic replaced the mechanical motifs of much of the eighteenth century. Philosophers and social theorists of all persuasions conceived of human life, and sometimes even the natural

---

*Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), p. 55; C. Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth", *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2: *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 152–84.

<sup>3</sup>) Cf. D. Hoy, "Nietzsche, Hume, and the Genealogical Method" in R. Schacht (ed.), *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morals"* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 251–68.

<sup>4</sup>) D. Hume, "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion" in D. Coleman (ed.), *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

world, as defined by creative and purposeful intentionality. Auguste Comte, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, and others all suggested that human life and human societies could be understood properly only as the products of historical processes. Nineteenth century historicism was almost always developmental. It conceived of history as guided or structured by certain principles. While the principles varied from thinker to thinker, the most commonly accepted ones included liberty, reason, nation, and statehood. These principles give a progressive direction to history.

Nietzsche's intellectual biography exhibits the influence of the all-pervasive historicism of the nineteenth century. His early philological writings are, for example, defiantly historical. But by the time of *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche's historicism has become less developmental and more radical.<sup>5</sup> Far from taking certain principles as guiding historical development, Nietzsche searches for the contingent, accidental sources of a belief in any such principles. This radical historicism appears in his transformation of genealogy. Consider the precursors of his genealogy. Hume went beneath cultural ideas and practices in order to pick out the continuous features of human life, where this emphasis on continuity served to vindicate the relevant ideas and practices by suggesting they were rooted in common experiences. Paul Rée's genealogy deployed the principle of the survival of the fittest to argue that modern morality is the highest stage of evolution yet attained.<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche argues that this simply fails to take seriously the problem of morality. To take that problem seriously, we have to inquire critically into the historical origins of our moral ideas.

Radical historicism does away with appeals to principles that lend necessity and unity to history. The result is a powerful emphasis on: nominalism, contingency, and contestability.

### I. *Nominalism*

Historicists generally conceive of human life as unfolding against a historical background. Human actions, practices, institutions come into

<sup>5</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. J. Norman, ed. R-P. Horstmann and J. Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> P. Rée, *The Origin of the Moral Sensations*, ed. R. Small (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

being in historical contexts that influence their content. Developmental historicists evoked more or less fixed principles to give unity to many of these historical entities and their progress. States, for example, were defined by traditions consisting of national characteristics or by the pathway to civilization. In contrast, radical historicists lean toward a nominalist conception of actions and practices and the traditions informing them. As Foucault argued, “anthropological universals” appear as historical constructs with no fixed content. Radical historicists eschew analyses of a structural concept – such as state, society, economy, nation, and class – that points to an essence or set of principles as defining its boundaries or development. As a result, radical historicism sometimes may seem opposed to all aggregate concepts and explanations. Yet radical historicists can deploy aggregate concepts – including developmental historicism, Christian morality, or disciplinary power – provided that they these concepts are conceived pragmatically in relation to what is being explained. Here a radical historicist explanation of actions and practices appeals to the historical background or tradition that informs them, where the relevant tradition is defined not by an essence or fixed principles but as the particular slice of the past that best explains the relevant actions and practices.

## II. *Contingency*

Clearly radical historicists cannot explain the change in actions, practices, and traditions by appealing to fixed principles or essences. They reject the teleological narratives of developmental historicism, including those that are widely associated with Marxism and critical theory. Radical historicists thus portray history as discontinuous and contingent. History is a series of contingent even accidental appropriations, modifications, and transformations from the old to the new. As Nietzsche wrote, there is “no more important proposition” for historians than:

that the origin of the emergence of a thing and its ultimate usefulness, its practical application and incorporation into a system of ends, are *toto coelo* separate; that anything in existence, having somehow come about, is continually interpreted anew, transformed and redirected to a new purpose by a power superior to it; that everything that occurs in the organic world consists of *overpowering, dominating*, and in their turn, overpowering and dominating consist

of re-interpretation, adjustment, in the process of which their former “meaning” and “purpose” must necessarily be obscured or completely obliterated.<sup>7</sup>

This emphasis on contingency may appear to suggest that change is inexplicable. Yet, radical historicists often describe and explain change; they just do so without appealing to overarching principles. Change occurs contingently as, for example, people reinterpret, modify, or transform an inherited tradition in response to novel circumstances or other dilemmas.

### III. *Contestability*

An emphasis on contingency implies that history is radically open in that what happens is always contestable. It suggests that there are always innumerable ways in which a thing – an action, practice, or tradition – may be reinterpreted, transformed, or overpowered. Thus, radical historicists are suspicious of attempts to portray a thing as unified and its transformation as peaceful. They highlight the diverse meanings that accompany any practice and the contests that accompany all attempts to transform practices. In doing so, radical historicists often adopt a decentred approach, where to decenter is to show how apparently uniform concepts, traditions, or practices are in fact social constructs that cover and even arise from individuals acting on diverse and changing meanings. Similarly, radical historicists often deploy a concept of power in order to highlight the diversity and contests that lie behind illusions of unity and necessity. When they do so, however, they rarely intend to point to a power-center. They do not use power to suggest that one group with a set of interests defined by its own social position dominates or exploits some other group. Rather, they use power simply to signal the presence of multiplicity and struggle.

## **Truth**

To conceive of genealogy as an expression of radical historicism is to clarify its epistemic commitments. Sometimes genealogy’s overlap with historicism is mistaken for skepticism, relativism, or even a suspension of epis-

---

<sup>7</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. K. Ansell-Pearson, trans. C. Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 51.

temic commitments. Yet a moments thought should dispel the idea that genealogy avoids truth claims. Genealogies obviously make claims about the truth, plausibility, and possibility of the philosophical positions they instantiate and the more concrete elements in their narratives. There is thus a need to clarify both the truths and concepts of truth to which genealogy is opposed, and the truths and concepts of truth on which it itself relies.

Radical historicism is clearly opposed to truth claims that do not recognize their own historicity, including all those that masquerade as utter certainties based on a pure reason or pure experience. From a radical historicist perspective, beliefs and truth-claims are always saturated by the particular tradition against the background of which they are made. Even simple experiences, let alone complex moral theories, depend in part on the prior webs of beliefs one brings to bear. Their plausibility or truth depends, in other words, on one accepting a number of other beliefs. No belief is simply certain on its own, verified or refuted by given experiences or given reasons.

It is important to emphasize that an opposition to utter certainties does not entail a denial of all truth claims. To the contrary, radical historicists still can make truth claims provided that they conceive of “truth” not as a kind of timeless certainty but as something more like “objectively valid for us” or “the best account of the world currently on offer”. Such historicist and anthropological concepts of objectivity require a convincing account of the way in which we are to compare and evaluate rival accounts of the world, but they do not require us to appeal to pure experience or pure reason let alone to suspend all of our epistemic commitments.

Comparisons of rival theories are not easy to analyze.<sup>8</sup> There is always a danger that comparisons tacitly assume the superiority of a particular perspective. Nonetheless, one aspect of such comparisons may well concern the ability of a theory to narrate itself and its competitors. The suggestion here is that a good account of the world should be able to provide an account of how and why it arose as well as an account of how and why its rival arose. If this suggestion is correct, then genealogies contribute fairly directly to the task of theory choice.

---

<sup>8</sup>) For my own attempt at a normative analysis of theory choice see M. Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chap. 3.

Radical historicism thus explains how genealogies can challenge truth claims without collapsing into the kind of totalizing critique that challenges all truth claims in a way that entails a performative contradiction. On the one hand, genealogists continually question, exposing the particularity of perspectives that appear to be universal or timeless truths, and this questioning extends to their own perspective. Genealogists may ask if their narratives and even the genealogical stance itself are just particular perspectives. On the other hand, to question beliefs is not necessarily to reject them, and to expose the particularity of a perspective is not necessarily to deny its validity, unless of course it is incompatible with recognition of its own particularity. Thus, genealogists may question their own narratives, and accept that the genealogical stance is a particular one that arose historically, without thereby rejecting their narratives or the genealogical stance.

In short, radical historicists will typically incorporate a self-reflexivity in their beliefs such that they situate them by reference to a particular tradition or narrative, but this self-reflexivity may not undercut the beliefs so much as contribute to the attempt to establish that historicism is the best account of the world currently on offer.

## **Critique**

To conceive of genealogy as an expression of radical historicism is to clarify its relationship to critique. The critical nature of genealogy concerns David Hoy, Martin Saar, and Tyler Krupp. As David Hoy suggests, genealogy's emphasis on nominalism, contingency, and contestability helps to distinguish it from other philosophical traditions that are sometimes associated with critique, including both dialectics and critical theory. Equally, if we simply equated genealogy with radical historicism, then we would surely have to allow that genealogy was not inherently critical. Radical historicists can tell all kinds of narratives, some of which may be forms of critical unmasking but others may be what Hoy, following Bernard Williams, calls vindicatory genealogies. Hoy suggests in particular that such vindicatory genealogies may enable us better to understand and to justify aspects of ourselves that we have overlooked. An example of such a vindicatory genealogy would be a thoroughly historicist narrative of the rise of the genea-



logical stance as a radical break with the kinds of principles and unities that had characterized developmental historicism.

While we could continue to distinguish between critical and vindicatory genealogies, it is perhaps easier to use radical historicism as an umbrella concept for both critical and vindicatory narratives, and thereby to restrict the term genealogy to radical historicism in its critical guise. Whatever terminological norms we adopt, we may ask: how does genealogy operate as a radical historicist form of critique?

As an expression of radical historicism genealogy operates primarily as a type of denaturalizing critique. Radical historicism overlaps with a nominalist and constructivist social ontology that emphasizes the contingency and contestability of beliefs, actions, and practices. Thus, it denaturalizes beliefs, actions, and practices that others conceive as in some way or other natural: when other people believe that certain social norms or ways of life are natural or inevitable, radical historicists denaturalize these norms and ways of life by suggesting that they arose out of contingent historical contexts. In other words, genealogy operates as a form of critique because it applies the denaturalizing tendency of radical historicism to unsettle those who ascribe a spurious naturalness to their particular beliefs and actions. Genealogy reveals the contingency and contestability of ideas and practices that hide these aspects of their origins. Of course, genealogists may buttress their critique by other forms of argument – such as the phenomenological or psychological unmasking associated with, for example, Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment* – but the distinctly genealogical form of critique derives from the denaturalizing effect of radical historicism.

It is perhaps worth briefly mentioning how my earlier discussion of the epistemic commitments associated with radical historicism illuminates the way genealogy operates as critique. On the one hand, radical historicists reject utter certainties: they denaturalize purportedly transcendent or universal perspectives that elide their own dependence on a particular tradition. But, on the other, radical historicists are not necessarily anti-realists: they try to trace the actual history and effects of various beliefs and practices, including purportedly transcendental or universal ones. The epistemic commitments of radical historicism also illuminate the characteristic style of many genealogies. On the one hand, suspicion of utter certainties may encourage genealogists to abandon standard claims to objectivity, to invent provocative aggregate concepts, and even to offer their narratives as

somewhat speculative. But, on the other, genealogists are trying to develop compelling narratives supported by evidence derived from empirical research, and in that respect, their research is, as Foucault noted, “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary.”<sup>9</sup>

The denaturalizing effect of radical historicism informs the other leading features of genealogy conceived as critique, several of which are discussed in detail by Saar. For a start, genealogies are usually histories of present subjectivities, for their critical impact depends on people still being immersed in the beliefs and practices that they denaturalize. In addition, genealogies typically explore the conditions of possibility of contemporary beliefs and practices, since they uncover the historical contingencies that made it possible for people today to think and act as they do. Here genealogists may deploy a concept of power in order to suggest that the present arose not as a necessary unity but rather out of struggles among diverse possibilities. Finally, genealogy opens novel spaces for personal and social transformation precisely because it loosens the hold on us of entrenched ideas and institutions; it frees us to imagine other possibilities.

Given that genealogy is a denaturalizing form of critique, it may appear irrelevant to beliefs and practices that avow their own contingency and contestability. What is the role of genealogy within such anti-foundational perspectives? This question has received nothing like enough attention. Perhaps radical historicism leads to a critical stance only toward ways of life that embody an alternative philosophy. Perhaps different varieties of radical historicism cannot engage one another through critiques but only by offering rival vindicatory narratives. Yet, there are other possibilities, several of which are discussed in detail by Krupp. Genealogies may serve critical and even self-critical purposes within a radical historicist anti-foundationalism. For example, concrete genealogies may provide a way of trying to gauge asymmetries in the extent to which different theories have been historically constitutive of the shared facts that now appear to support them. They may suggest that certain theories, subjectivities, and power-relations played especially notable roles in producing our shared world. In doing so, moreover, concrete genealogies may give us reasons for a cautious skepticism toward such theories, even if they are ones that we ourselves hold.

---

<sup>9</sup> M. Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 76.

## Nietzsche and Foucault

To conceive of genealogy as radical historicist critique is to provide a yardstick by which to distinguish Nietzsche and especially Foucault's genealogies from their other writings. The place of genealogy in Nietzsche's writings is discussed by Saar, while the essays by Colin Koopman and Thomas Biebricher are detailed studies of its delimited place in Foucault's work.

Nietzsche had a background in historical philology, from which he had gone on to write historical studies on broader topics, including the rise of tragedy as a cultural genre. Yet many of his early studies are broadly documentary and thus compatible with the idea of history as an inductive science and perhaps even with a developmental historicism. As Saar suggests, the distinguishing feature of Nietzsche's genealogies, including *Beyond Good and Evil* as well as *On the Genealogy of Morals*, is the way in which they operate as denaturalizing critiques of moral beliefs and practices. These genealogies change the objects they discuss by showing them to be historically contingent, as when Nietzsche associates Christian morality with a shift in the concept "good" as being opposed to "evil" rather than "bad".

Today Nietzsche still appears out of his times in his challenge to developmental historicism. Similar challenges or even doubts remained very rare until at least the so-called "crisis of historicism" in the early twentieth century. Even then, a more common response to the dilemmas facing developmental historicism appears in the formation of modernist social science. Modernist social science broke with developmental narratives framed in terms of principles but it did not turn to genealogy and radical historicism. To the contrary, modernist social science is characterized by formal, ahistorical explanations, including correlations, classifications, and appeals to synchronic systems and structures and the formal location and function of units within them.

Foucault's use of genealogy is complicated by his clear debt to a modernist structuralism. His early archaeological studies appealed to epistemes that were apparently self-regulating. Epistemes acted as quasi-structures explaining their own content and, in the absence of historicism, there was no way to explain the change from one quasi-structure to another. As Koopman suggests, the distinguishing feature of Foucault's genealogies is their introduction of temporal complexity and contingency. His genealogical stance

begins to replace quasi-structures with multiple phenomena in a state of emergence, displacements, conquests, and flux. Where his archaeologies presented a series of discrete synchronic moments, his genealogies introduced history as a diachronic process, enabling him to write histories that were useful as critiques of the present. The result was *Discipline and Punish* and *History and Sexuality*.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, even Foucault's writings after his avowed turn to genealogy are not always recognized as those of a radical historicist. *Discipline and Punish* can all too easily be read as an inverted developmental historicism, telling an anti-progressive story of the triumph of darkness. Moreover, as Biebricher suggests, governmentality studies often lapse back into an approach that owes more to modernist sociology with its ideal types than to genealogy. The problem is perhaps that genealogy is a form of radical historicism struggling to make its presence felt at a time when the human sciences are dominated by modernist modes of knowing. Even critical theorists often find it easier to conceive of discourses and practices as quasi-structures marked by differences and exclusions than to engage in the meticulous, patient research necessary to trace the contingent, accidental shifts and contests from which such discourses and practices emerged historically.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that genealogy is a mode of knowledge associated with radical historicism. More particularly, a genealogy is a critique of ideas and practices that hide the contingency of human life behind formal ahistorical or developmental perspectives. As critical narratives, genealogies are committed to the truth of radical historicism and, perhaps more provisionally, the truth of their own empirical content. It should now be clear that this general theory of genealogy meets the criteria mentioned at the beginning of this essay: it explains the rise of genealogy in the nineteenth century by locating a radical turn within a broader historicism; it indicates how genealogy operates as a denaturalizing critique sometimes

---

<sup>10</sup> M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock Publishers, 1977); and M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, Vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, & Vol. 3: *The Care of the Self*, trans R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978–1985).

associated with distinctive stylistic devices; and it applies to the main genealogies offered by Nietzsche and Foucault in a way that avoids assimilating all their writings to itself.

To conclude, I would add that this theory of genealogy has other advantages. In particular, this theory of genealogy allows for an appropriate self-reflexivity. The rise and content of genealogy are explained using the same historicist mode of explanation that characterizes genealogies. Genealogy is explained by a historical narrative showing how it came into being. Of course, while genealogy can apply its radical historicist form of explanation to itself, it does not thereby offer a genealogical critique of itself. But the absence of a genealogical critique of genealogy does not show the theory of genealogy to be self-defeating; it does not imply that genealogy has to treat itself differently from other ideas and practices. Rather, it shows only that genealogy does not have critical purchase on any idea or practice, such as genealogy itself, which recognizes its own contingency. A critic might argue that genealogy remains self-defeating in that recognition of its own contingency would undermine its implicit commitment to the truth of radical historicism. But the critic's argument is not valid. There is no reason why the genealogist should not believe both that radical historicism arose contingently, perhaps even accidentally, and that it is true.

Arguably, the main advantage of this theory of genealogy is simply that it focuses attention on philosophical issues. Genealogy as an activity is in danger of being rendered facile by an apparent reluctance to engage philosophical issues. Genealogists and other critical historians should not remain content simply to replicate genealogy as a technique of inquiry and narration. Nor can they avoid the difficult (and by now familiar) questions about their own commitments and whether these are compatible with the genealogical stance. Quite the contrary, genealogists should open themselves up to philosophical innovations and challenges. I hope the essays that follow will help will to inspire just such an openness.

Copyright of *Journal of the Philosophy of History* is the property of Brill Academic Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.