

GENEALOGY AS A VINDICATORY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

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Genealogies have traditionally been seen as debunking enterprises. They are historical narratives that discredit our practices, concepts, and values by tracing them to their problematic origins. But not all genealogies debunk. Philosophers such as Bernard Williams, E. J. Craig, and Phillip Pettit also use genealogy to “vindicate” i.e. to explain our practices in a way that supports them. These vindicators not only take genealogy to be critical to their explanation but also take genealogy to give their approach a distinctive advantage. Against such an over-optimistic assessment, I argue genealogy neither plays a unique explanatory role nor a particularly fruitful one. Worse yet, genealogies may even obscure the underlying explanatory structure of their projects.

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Introduction

Genealogies have traditionally been seen as debunking enterprises. They are historical narratives that discredit our practices, concepts, and values by tracing them to their problematic origins.

Here are some examples:

- Friedrich Nietzsche aims to discredit our moral practices by tracing them back to the desire for revenge by the powerless in his *Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1998).
- David Hume and other Enlightenment philosophers aim to discredit our concept of God by tracing it back to our ancestors' primitive fear of the unknown (Hume 2007).
- Contemporary philosophers challenge the epistemic standing of the content of our mental states (beliefs, experiences, or intuitions) on the ground that these mental states can (or cannot) be explained by some prior fact (Korman 2019).

Not all genealogies debunk. Some have also been used to “vindicate.” These narratives aim to explain our practices in a way that supports them. *Vindicators*, such as E. J. Craig, Bernard Williams, and Philip Pettit, use genealogies to vindicate our use of certain concepts by showing *how the practices associated with the concept could be useful*. Instead of tracing our practices back to their shameful origins, vindicatory genealogies show us how these practices could have come into use in response to our needs. For instance:

- Craig reconstructs how our concept of knowledge could have come into use in response to our need to flag good informants (Craig 1999).

- Williams reconstructs how our concern for truthfulness, as sustained by the concept of accuracy and sincerity, could have come into use in response to our need for effectively pooling information (Williams 2010).
- Pettit reconstructs how our concept of moral responsibility could have come into use in response to our need to avoid withdrawing trust from mostly reliable cooperators (Pettit 2018).

The debunkers and the vindicators both take genealogical narratives to play an indispensable role in their respective projects. For debunkers, genealogies provide critical information that challenges the epistemic standing of our ideas. For vindicators, however, the role genealogies play is far less straightforward. Each has his own take:

- For Craig, genealogy helps us identify and explain a wide range of complex practical effects a practice might have.¹ He claims his story of how we might have come to use the concept of knowledge puts him in a better position to explain why features such as belief, reliability, and truth tend to be important factors for us to consider someone as knowing something.
- For Williams, genealogy helps us explain why having a practice is useful without crudely reducing the practice to a mere instrument for our use.² He claims his story of how we

¹ In his *Knowledge and State of Nature*, Craig does not explicitly take his project to be providing a vindicatory genealogy. He only explicitly considers his project as a vindicatory genealogy in his later paper, *Genealogies and the State of Nature*. For the purpose of this paper, Craig's shift in how he conceives of his project is of little significance. Both Craig himself and other vindicators take his project as an exemplar of vindicatory genealogies (see (Williams 2010 p. 21) and (Craig 1999 p. 52) for example).

² For William's discussion of genealogy's role see (Williams 2010 ch. 2). Later commentators such as Queloz have tried to elaborate vindicatory genealogy along this line. For the purpose of this paper, I subsume these later accounts under William's suggestion because they pursue the same basic strategy.

might have come to acquire a concern for accuracy and sincerity puts him in a better position to explain why these concerns tend to be (and should be) taken as intrinsically (rather than instrumentally) valuable.

- For Pettit, genealogy helps us identify and explain features of the practice that are only accessible through the participant's point of view.³ He claims his story of how we might have come to acquire the concept of moral responsibility puts him in a better position to explain why holding someone responsible has both backward-looking and forward-looking dimensions.

All these proposals share the highly suggestive claim that genealogy provides some kind of explanatory advantage. Surprisingly, none of the vindicators have developed this claim in detail. My goal in this paper is to develop and assess this claim. I think all three proposals boil down to the claim that appealing to a genealogy allows us to explain a practice in a way that better accommodates our pre-theoretical intuitions about the practice than comparable alternatives.

But this idea is misguided. As a consequence, the vindicators have failed to show genealogies make *any explanatory contribution*. Worse yet, genealogies may even obscure their project's underlying explanatory structure.

What is the problem? In a nutshell, appealing to genealogies is an explanatory appendix. Not only can other non-genealogical approaches play the three roles the vindicators have identified above. Genealogies also do not add anything to the explanation by playing these roles. In each

While they have developed William's suggestion in more sophisticated ways, addressing them is outside of the scope of the writing sample version of the paper.

³ For Pettit's discussion of genealogy's role see (Pettit 2018 ch.1).

case, the vindicator presumes a sufficiently detailed account of the practice in question. Given such an account, all three of the above answers trivially follow. While one can appeal to genealogies to vindicate, they add nothing to the explanation. Instead, it is the sufficiently detailed account of the practice that allows us to identify how the practice could be useful, with or without any appeal to genealogy.

Outline

I begin by clarifying how genealogy can vindicate in the first place. In the first section, I elucidate the idea of vindicating a practice. To vindicate a practice is to explain how the practice can make a useful difference in the lives of those who engage with the practice. With Pettit's vindication of moral responsibility as an example, I identify two core commitments that distinguish vindicating with genealogies from other ways of vindicating.

In the second section, I work out the first key commitment: to vindicate a practice with genealogies is to provide a potential explanation for the practice. Instead of providing an account of how the practice actually works, a potential explanation offers a prescriptive account that specifies how the practice should work.

In the third section, I work out the second key commitment: to vindicate a practice with genealogies is to provide the potential explanation of the practice by giving a story of how the practice could have come about. Here, the story provides the necessary explanatory constraint for a potential explanation to vindicate successfully.

In the fourth and final section, I assess the suggestion that vindicating by appealing to genealogies has a distinctive explanatory advantage. I consider a stronger and more modest reading of the thesis. Under the stronger reading, genealogies have a distinctive explanatory

advantage because it uniquely satisfies their explanatory role. Against this reading, I show one can pursue the basic explanatory move that underlies vindicatory genealogies, without appealing to genealogies. To support my case, I provide three non-genealogical cases that vindicate in the same way.

Under the more modest reading, genealogies have a distinctive explanatory advantage because they satisfy their explanatory role particularly well (rather than uniquely). I argue the best way to cash out this reading is to claim genealogies provide a systematic way of generating more successful potential explanations. They are more successful because they better accommodate our intuitive understanding of the practice. Unfortunately, even this more plausible reading fails. What does the work in the explanatory move is not genealogy. Instead, it is a sufficiently detailed account of the practice in question. Given such an account, everything the genealogy is recruited to explain follows trivially.

Section 1: What is it to Vindicate?

To Vindicate is to Identify Usefulness.

Typically, to vindicate a practice⁴ is to explain the practice in a way that supports it. In contrast, the vindicators are interested in supporting the practice in the more specific sense of showing how these practices can be useful.⁵ This is because these vindicatory projects are typically

⁴ In this paper, I understand practices broadly. At an individual level, practice P includes dispositions and concepts that allows the individual to participate in and engage with P. On the social level, P includes the convention or institutions that sustains and reproduces P.

⁵ The sense of usefulness used here is very thin (in contrast to a thicker conception of usefulness that appeals to the principle of utility, for example). In this thin sense, usefulness can include anything from satisfying very idiosyncratic needs of individuals to very generic needs shared by most (if not all) human beings. In this manner, any given practice makes or can make a practical difference in a wide variety of ways. Appealing to such a thin sense of usefulness might raise two concerns. First, any practice may be over-determined by usefulness. Second, it is unclear how one should rank and order these different senses

developed as responses to skeptical worries that destabilize our commitment to the practice they hope to save.

- Craig vindicates the concept of knowledge in response to the skeptical worry that the fact that epistemologists have failed to produce a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the concept of knowledge gives us a reason to doubt the existence of the concept (and in turn whether we are justified in its use) (Craig 1999 ch. 1).
- Williams vindicates the concern for truthfulness (which he takes to be consisting of the virtues of accuracy and sincerity) in response to the “post-modernist” worry truth does not exist and that the concern for truth (especially that of the past) often turns out to be biased, ideological, and self-serving (Williams 2010 ch. 1).
- Pettit vindicates the concept of moral desirability and responsibility in response to the naturalist worry that moral properties such as desirability and responsibility are not fundamental properties of the universe, as specified by the natural sciences. This, in turn, cast doubt on not only the existence of these concepts but also our commitment to using these concepts (Pettit 2018 ch. 1).

Against the various worries that put our commitment to the practice in question, the vindicators aim to stabilize our commitment by showing the practice is useful for us. Their hope is that if we

of usefulness, if conflict were to arise. A detailed response to these two concerns is outside the scope of the paper. But for a preliminary response, we should note that the vindicators are mostly interested in providing prima facie reasons that support a practice (in contrast to all things consider reasons, which may require an overarching value to rank and order the prima facie reasons). Furthermore, just because we have many prima facie reasons for engaging with a practice does not mean all these reasons are equal. For instance, generally speaking, the fact that a practice satisfies more generic (or basic) needs provides a stronger prima facie reason for engaging with a practice than its satisfaction of a more idiosyncratic need.

can show having the practice in question would make a *welcoming change* in our lives, we would have a good reason to keep the practice despite the skeptical worries.⁶

To see how this move works, let's take a closer look at Pettit's vindication of the concept of moral responsibility.⁷ Pettit argues having the concept and employing it to hold each other responsible allows a community to maintain a social environment that encourages its members to uphold their pledges (especially the pledge to abide by the standard of moral desirability⁸ i.e., moral standards). Pettit calls this social environment a moral ecology because by holding each other responsible, the members of a community encourage each other to be sensitive to and abide by a shared moral standard.

Specifically, Pettit focuses on the practice of holding each other responsible for doing something morally wrong (with the absence of excuses and exemptions). In these cases, he thinks we are effectively doing three things:

1. [Recognition] We recognize that the person has the agential capacity to uphold the moral standard. When we hold a person responsible, recognition is commonly expressed by statements such as "You could have avoided doing the wrong thing."

⁶ This is meant to be an exhaustive characterization of what the vindicators aim to achieve in their project. Pettit, for instance, goes a sept further and claim that if we can provide a plausible narrative that shows how our moral concepts can emerge without appealing to any non-natural entities, the narrative would increase the plausibility of the concept as a real, natural entity. But moves such as these takes us beyond the scope of this paper. Here, I am interested in the vindicator's shared strategy of defusing skeptical worries by appealing to usefulness.

⁷ From this point on, I will use Pettit's vindication of the concept of moral responsibility as the archetype of a vindicatory project (later on as a vindicatory genealogy), for the sake of simplicity. This is because I think Pettit's version is the most worked out and up to date of all three. The analysis I offer (and later on criticism) also applies to other vindicatory projects (and vindicatory genealogies).

⁸

2. [Exhortation] We (retroactively) exhort the person who is held responsible to live up to the moral standard. When we hold a person responsible, exhortation is commonly expressed by statements such as “You could have done the right thing.”
3. [Reprimanding] We reprimand the person for having violated the moral standard. When we hold a person responsible, a reprimand is commonly expressed as a bad opinion of the person (for having failed to live up to the moral standard), which is likely to impose a reputational cost on the person.

Pettit contrasts a community that holds each other responsible (in this way) with a more primitive community that can only reinforce its shared standard of moral desirability by expelling those who have violated the standard. In the primitive community, the reinforcement of moral standards has the characteristics of brute regulation, which comes with a cost for both individuals and the community as a whole.

First, brute regulation comes with a cost to each individual because each would live in fear. This comes from the fact that the primary reason for abiding by moral standards is because of their fear of being expelled from the community (and losing all of the benefits of being able to rely on and cooperate with other community members). Brute regulation also comes with a cost to the community because if there were a community that solely reinforces its moral standards in this way, it would quickly turn into a “social wasteland.” Everyone is going to occasionally fail to live up to the standard. A community that expels a member based on a single offense would eventually expel all of its members.

In contrast, the community that holds each other responsible would be able to reinforce its moral standards while circumventing both problems. First, individuals would no longer simply live in

fear; instead, they become more sensitive to their capacity to live up to the moral standard and strive to live up to the standard. This is because when one is held responsible, he is not just threatened with expulsion (as in the case of brute regulation). More importantly, it is pointed out to him that he could have and should live up to the moral standard (given the recognition and exhortation effects).

This also means a community can also reinforce its moral standards while avoiding turning into a social wasteland. Now, community members are no longer expelled on the basis of a single offense. Instead, individuals are given a second chance and encouraged to improve. While the threat of expulsion remains in the background (given the reprimanding effect), expulsion is only used as the last resort (such as in a case in which an individual repeatedly fails to live up to the moral standard the reprimanding effect would turn into expulsion). This would mean only a few exceptional individuals would be expelled.

As a whole, having the practice of holding responsible (and the concept that sustains it) would make a welcoming change in our lives, both individually and as communities. If the skeptical worry is that the idea of moral responsibility refers to metaphysically unacceptable entities (such as a free will that is able to interfere with laws of nature or pre-established facts given by circumstances), we can rest easy. Our story of how we hold each other responsible makes no reference to any entities of this kind. Even if we were to go along with the skeptic and accept that our practice of holding responsible refers to metaphysically problematic things, it still does not follow that we should abandon the practice. Given the concept can do important work for us, we have a good reason to use it.

Here, we see Pettit vindicates the idea of moral responsibility by showing how it can be useful to us. In a similar way, Craig vindicates the concept of knowledge by appealing to its role of

helping us flag good informants. And Williams vindicates the idea of truthfulness by appealing to its role of helping us effectively share and pool information.

Vindicating vs Vindicating with Genealogies

If to vindicate a practice is just to justify a practice by appealing to its usefulness, vindicators would not be the only ones who vindicate. Many others have tried to respond to skeptical worries about a practice by appealing to the practice's usefulness. Just looking at the literature on moral responsibility alone, we find a long tradition of "moral influence theories" that appeals to the practical benefits of holding responsible as a defense of the idea of moral responsibility (more on these theories in the next section).

So, what makes the vindicators' projects distinctive is not so much their appeal to usefulness. It is their way of explaining a practice's usefulness that makes them stand out. Instead of directly justifying the practice by pointing to their usefulness, the vindicators give us genealogies or stories that trace how the practice could have developed.

But why appeal to stories? If our goal is to show how a practice is useful, why not just directly investigate how the practice works? Here, we find two core commitments that unify vindicatory genealogies as a distinctive approach:

1. To vindicate a practice, we should appeal to potential explanations.
2. A story of how the practice could have developed is a particularly good way to construct a potential explanation that vindicates a practice.

The vindicators do not exactly talk in these terms. But I think these two commitments are the best way for us to not only make sense of vindicatory genealogies as a distinctive way of

vindicating a practice but also lays the basis for elucidating the vindicator's claims about their approaches' explanatory advantage. In the next two sections, I will examine each commitment in turn.

Section 2: How should we Vindicate?

Better to Vindicate with Potential Explanations

A potential explanation is an explanation that may contain false (or even impossible) presumptions. The explanation is potential because it would only explain if the presumption it makes were true. Even though such an explanation does not explain the actual world, it could still have explanatory value because, in virtue of its false presumptions, it illuminates certain features of the actual world that we would not have otherwise noticed (Nozick 2013 ch. 1).

A good example of potential explanations is political philosophers' appeal to state of nature scenarios to explain political order. In these scenarios, political philosophers posit a condition in which political order is absent (which frequently contains simplified, false presumptions about human beings and their social environment) to identify reasons that potentially explain and justify existing political order (Nozick 2013 ch. 2).

Potential explanations of a practice can also vindicate the practice, though with one important qualification. Since our potential explanations contain certain counterfactual (or even counter-possible) claims, they only tell us how the practice in question might be useful, rather than how the practice is in fact useful.

But this should not give us any worries. When we vindicate a practice, we are not necessarily interested in the practice exactly as it exists. Suppose there is a practice that is not currently useful to us. But with some revision, the practice can become useful. We would still have a good

reason to be committed to the practice, in so far as we can improve it. To put the point slightly differently, when we explain the practice, we are not necessarily looking for a descriptive account of the practice. A prescriptive account might work just as well.

This is exactly Pettit's strategy in his vindication of moral responsibility.⁹ First, he posits a community in which there is a standard of moral desirability but without the practices (and concept) of holding responsible. Second, he shows why a practice of holding responsible (with the characteristic features of recognition, exhortation, and reprimand) is likely to develop in response to the complications that arise when the community enforces its moral standards.

Pettit provides a potential explanation because the picture of how a primitive society might come to adopt the practices of holding responsible is highly simplified such that it does not at all track how moral responsibility has evolved in human societies. This is by design. It is meant to show us why holding each other responsible (in the sense he specified) would be an improvement upon alternative ways of reinforcing moral standards.

If this is his goal, Pettit need not commit to the claim that his picture of moral responsibility exactly tracks how we currently hold each other responsible. For instance, he may agree with a skeptic of moral responsibility who thinks when we ordinarily hold each other responsible, we appeal to metaphysically problematic ideas (such as some kind of libertarian free will, ultimate responsibility, or basic desert). He may even agree with these skeptics that these ideas prompt us to hold each responsible in unjustified ways (such as angry blame or retributive punishment).

⁹ We can see the remarkable structural similarity between this potential explanation for political order and Pettit's explanation of moral responsibility. In fact, both Craig and William, explicitly compares vindicatory genealogies to the state of nature scenarios in political philosophy. A more in-depth comparison between the two approaches would take up to far afield. What should concern us at the moment is that both are potential explanations.

Nevertheless, Pettit can still maintain that we have a good reason to be committed to the practice of holding responsible because it could do important work for us.

This is not to say that we have an all things considered reason to be committed to the practice.

We might conclude our practices of holding responsible are so entrenched with these theoretically and practically problematic commitments that it is better to abandon the practice, all things considered. Even so, we should still take into consideration the potential benefits that Pettit has identified.

This gives the vindicators a distinctive advantage over others who vindicates by appealing to how the practice actually works. Take the moral influence theorists for instance. These theorists typically give us accounts of moral responsibility based on forward-looking features of holding responsible:

- Moritz Schlick argues that imputing responsibility to a person is best explained as a way of punishing and rewarding the person to encourage good behavior (Schlick 1939 p. 151-154).
- Dan Dennett argues that taking a person to be responsible should be understood as the best way we have to maintain a system of practices that promotes good behavior (Dennett 1984 ch. 7).

These accounts of moral responsibility (at least, in so far as they have been commonly understood) aim to capture how our moral responsibility practice typically works. But if this is the case, these accounts fail miserably. Here are some complications that have traditionally plagued these theories:

1. They fail to capture the explanatory relation between holding and being responsible. We typically determine the appropriateness of holding each other responsible based on whether we think they are responsible. But moral influence theories seem to suggest the explanation goes the other way around.
2. They also fail to capture how we hold each other responsible. We typically hold each other responsible without any forward-looking consideration. But the moral influence theories seem to suggest that forward-looking considerations are a salient part of our practice of holding responsible.

These early attempts to vindicate moral responsibility have failed due to their ambition and their overly optimistic assessment of the practice. They are ambitious in the sense that not only do they want to propose an account of how moral responsibility should work. They also want the same account to be able to capture how moral responsibility actually works. They are optimistic in the sense that they hope to (at least partially) support their prescriptions of how moral responsibility should work by appealing to the fact that moral responsibility already works this way. Indeed, if this were to work, they would have a nice picture in which all the resources they need to improve the practice are already contained in the practice itself. But unfortunately, both their ambition and optimism have fallen short.

In contrast, the vindicators have taken a more modest approach by appealing to potential explanations. The good news is that the traditional worries raised against the moral influence theories simply no longer apply. But the bad news is appealing to potential explanation also invites new worries about what justifies their prescriptive accounts. This is where genealogies come into the picture.

Section 3: Why Vindicate with Genealogies?

Vindicating with Potential Explanations Need Explanatory Constraints to be Successful

The vindicators' appeal to potential explanations to vindicate may leave the impression that they are in the game of constructing practices out of the blue. But this cannot be the case. The vindicators still need to constrain their potential explanation for their explanation to provide a good reason in support of the practice.

First, we might ask why we should believe that the potential explanation explains the practice in question. Even though the goal is no longer to offer a descriptive account of the practice in question, it seems plausible that if one's prescriptive account revises too much of the practice, we would no longer be offering an account of the practice in question at all. Instead, we have simply sneakily changed the topic of conversation.

Second, for the potential explanation to give us a good reason to be committed to the actual practice, we should also ensure that the sense of usefulness we identified is not trivial. For any practice, there is a wide variety of merely possible ways for it to make a useful difference for someone. If we do not pick out a salient sense of usefulness, we would effectively just be picking out one among this sea of mere possibilities. Our vindications would not just come easily but also cheaply.

So, I think there are (at least) two constraints that any successful vindication that appeals to a potential explanation should satisfy:

1. First, it should show, in a principled way, why its potential explanation is an explanation of the practice in question.

2. Second, it should show that its prescriptive account of the practice is a strong enough possibility such that we should take it into consideration in assessing our commitment to the practice in question.

Without these explanatory constraints, our potential explanations quickly become arbitrary. A successful vindication should be sensitive to the existing practice in these ways. But if we are right to think that should not vindicate by directly appealing to how the practice works, how can we appropriately constrain our potential explanations?

Genealogies Gives us the Necessary Explanatory Constraints for a Successful Vindication

The vindicators suggest we can find the source of constraint in our *intuitive understanding* of the practice. Different vindicators appeal to different features of the practice.¹⁰ But for our purpose, we can abstract away from these differences, as their explanatory strategy is basically the same. They all use genealogy as a way of mobilizing our *intuitive understanding* of the practice (like a thought experiment)¹¹ to provide an account of how the practice *could make a useful difference* in our lives.

As discussed in the previous section, genealogies are stories that show how a practice could have developed. Here, we see the main goal of appealing to these stories is for the vindicators to have a principled way of constructing a potential explanation for the practice. A story can represent different versions of the practice across the time axis. This gives the vindicator a way to

¹⁰ For Craig, it is the practice's practical effects. For Williams, it is the practice's self-effacing functionality. For Pettit, it is the properties of the practice that can only be understood from the participant point of view.

¹¹ Though the vindicators do not directly understand genealogies in these terms, the appeal to our intuitive understanding is far from alien to their enterprises (see (Craig 1999 ch.1) for instance).

progressively develop a more complex account of the practice that captures the intuitive features and characteristics of the practice that one otherwise would have missed.¹²

To further develop this suggestion, we can understand genealogy as a process of reconstruction.¹³ We would begin by positing a fictional state of nature, which we have seen in Pettit's fictional primitive community. In these scenarios, human beings possess certain basic capacities and needs. But they lack the practice under investigation.

When we posit a state of nature for any practice, we are, effectively, ascribing a basic function to the practice. A practice has a function when it has practical implications that satisfy our needs. In this case, the function ascribed is basic in the sense that the needs, practical implications, and how these needs might be satisfied involved in the ascription are likely to be rudimentary. They may only be able to accommodate a limited aspect of our intuitions about how the practice works.

As the reconstruction proceeds, we would try to show how these human beings might come to adopt a more complex practice (with additional practical implications or even giving rise to new needs) in response to certain practical pressures. These pressures can include both dynamics internal to the conditions posited in the state of nature and additional, more circumstantial factors.¹⁴

¹² This point seems especially salient if the practice is actually a produce a long historical process, tied to a host of contingent features.

¹³ Some later commentators that elaborate on the works of the vindicators such as Kusch and Queloz have explicitly compare genealogy to a modeling process (see (Kusch 2013), (Kusch & McKenna 2020), and queloz2021a) for examples).

¹⁴ This would entail that genealogies (in this conception) can be a mix of hypothetical reconstruction and historical data. For this reason, some vindicators have maintained that vindicatory genealogies step in between more traditional historical genealogies (offered by Nietzsche and Foucault) and hypothetical

In this way, we can develop our explanation further to accommodate more of our intuitions about the practice in question. At each stage, we can compare our reconstruction to our intuitive understanding of the practice to see if there are any additional features or characteristics that we might want to explain. If we discern a difference, we can explore if our hypothesis can be extended to explain the feature or the characteristics in question¹⁵.

In Pettit's vindication of moral responsibility, he initially ascribes the reprimanding function to the practice of holding someone for doing morally wrong. If he were to stop here, his account would not be very different from that of the moral influence theorists. Not only would this initial way of holding responsible lack many of the characteristics of how we typically hold each other responsible. In the context of the primitive community, the initial way of holding responsible also creates problems at the individual and community levels. This further prompts Pettit to enrich his account of holding responsible (with recognition and extortion effect), as a solution to the problem.

Importantly, our goal here is not to forcibly adjust our account to fit new data, akin to attempts of saving defective research programs through ad hoc explanations. The fact that our hypothesis could accommodate our intuitive understanding does not entail it is true. Instead, our goal is to sketch out the various ways a practice could potentially make a useful difference.

state of nature theories (offered Hobbes and Nozick). However, I think the vindicators exaggerate the degree to which they project is a historical enterprise. Even though vindicatory genealogies can integrate historical data, these data are significant only in so far as contribute to the overarching explanatory aim. In this way, historical data is used in an unabashedly ahistorical manner.

¹⁵ This process of accommodating our intuitive understanding of how the practice works is ad hoc--- in the sense that we retroactively adjust our explanation to accommodate new data. However, the ad hoc-ness of our explanation is not problem, given our goal of vindicating a practice.

Here, the fact that our explanation is underdetermined by the data is not a problem but an opportunity. The reconstructive process gives us a way to assess whether our hypothesis can adequately accommodate our intuitive understanding of the practice. When we encounter features or characteristics of the practice that the basic function we posited cannot satisfactorily explain, we should search for alternative, more fruitful hypotheses.

In this way, genealogies' reconstructive process gives us a principled way to select from the complex characteristics of our existing practice and other features about us or the world that may contribute to the explanation. We can construct a potential explanation of how the practice could be useful while accommodating our intuitive understanding of the practice to the best of our ability. So, genealogy allows us to satisfy the first explanatory constraint we need for a successful potential explanation.

Genealogy also gives us a way to navigate the second constraint. The strength of our potential explanation would directly depend on the plausibility of the feature we posit in the state of nature. The more we think that the kind of human being and their social environment are like us and our societies, the more salient the sense of usefulness identified should be for us. This is why vindicators tend to try to posit generic features that are universally shared by all human beings and societies.

The Vindicators' Argument for Genealogies' Explanatory Advantage

At this point, we can summarize the results of our investigation. The vindicator's claim that vindicatory genealogy has a distinctive advantage should be understood as the claim that genealogy gives us a good way of constructing a potential explanation, compared to other ways of vindicating. And they offer the following argument in defense of the claim.

1. [Potential Explanation] Vindicating a practice by appealing to potential explanations is better than actual explanations.
2. [Reconstructive Process] Vindicating a practice with a genealogy is distinct from other ways of vindicating in that it generates its potential explanations by reconstructing how a practice could have developed across a hypothetical timeline.
3. [Intuition Claim] A genealogy's reconstructive process allows us to be more sensitive to intuitive features of the practice that we otherwise would have missed.
4. Vindication with genealogy has an explanatory advantage over other ways of vindicating.

Section 4: Is Genealogy an Explanatory Appendix?

Now, we can begin to assess the vindicators' claim that genealogy gives their approach a distinctive explanatory advantage. But the claim admits both a stronger and a more modest interpretation. In the vindicators' discussions, it is not always clear how strongly they intend to take the claim. I will assess them in turn.

The Strong Reading and the Broader Family of Vindicatory Explanations

On the stronger reading, genealogy gives the vindicators' approach an advantage because only genealogy can play the explanatory role the vindicators have identified.¹⁶ But this reading is too

¹⁶ There are some direct textual evidences (though far from conclusive) for the vindicators' endorsement of this stronger reading. At various points of their work, Craig and Williams seem to endorse this stronger thesis. Take a look at the following passage, for instance: "To claim that only the genealogical method can do this sounds rash... But it sounds less rash if we put it the other way round, saying that any method that can do this will count as genealogical. Not just less rash, but quite likely true" [Craig (2007) p. 200]. Here, the notable exception is Pettit, who explicitly distances himself from the stronger version of the thesis.

strong. As we have seen above, if we take the relevant contrast to be any account that vindicates. The vindicators would hardly be unique. Even when we take the relevant contrast to be accounts that vindicate a practice with potential explanations that appeal to needs and ascribe functions, we still do not have an explanatory pattern that is unique to the vindicators.

When we begin to think in these terms, we can discover a whole world of vindicatory explanations that fit the pattern. But not all of them appeal to genealogies. Other than genealogies, we could provide a potential explanation of a practice's usefulness by appealing to historical facts, hypothetical scenarios, or even certain tendencies in the existing practice. Here are some examples for each in order:

- Historians, such as Benedict Anderson, provide a potential explanation of how national identities are useful to nations by appealing to how various national identities have historically been shaped [Anderson (2006)].
- Some academics provide a potential explanation of how the existing publishing system is useful for academics by appealing to a hypothetical scenario in which the peer review system is dismantled.
- Revisionist theorists of moral responsibility, such as Manuel Vargas, provide a potential explanation of how our practices of moral responsibility are useful by appealing to certain desirable consequences that our practice sometimes has [Vargas (2013)].

All these cases vindicate their respective practice in a way that fits the basic explanatory pattern. They identify certain practical effects that the practice could have (I), needs we do have (N), and how the practical effects could be useful by satisfying those identified needs (S). Let's see how this works out in each case:

- The historical origin of national identities shows (I) they potentially *promote unity amongst culturally distinct groups*. And (S) if national identities have such an effect, their role in promoting unity would tend to satisfy (N) the state's *need to reduce conflict and facilitates cooperation among the citizenry*.
- The hypothetical scenario in which the publication system is dismantled shows (I) the system potentially creates a *space for academic free expression*. And (S) if the system has such an effect, its role in creating a space for free expression would tend to satisfy (N) the academics' *need for their intellectual freedom to be protected*.
- The fact that our moral responsibility practice sometimes makes us more responsive to moral reasons shows (I) the practice potentially cultivates moral agency. And (S) if the practice has such an effect, it would tend to satisfy (N) our need to maintain a moral community through the exchange of reasons.

Given these examples, we should reject the strong reading.

The Modest Reading and Genealogy's Role in Digesting Complexities

Let's move to the more modest reading of the vindicator's claim. To make a distinctive explanatory contribution, genealogies need not be uniquely able to fulfill the explanatory roles the vindicators have identified. Perhaps, genealogy provides an advantage because it serves these explanatory roles particularly well.

Unfortunately, the fruitfulness defense fails. To pursue the defense, we have treated our intuitive understanding of a practice as, more or less, a neutral set of data. The more an account captures the data, the more successful an account would be. But the main problem is we simply do not

have this kind of intuitive understanding. Instead, it is an open question which kind of information our potential explanation should accommodate. But if we were to give up on the implausible treatment of intuitive understanding that we have presumed so far, it also becomes questionable if genealogy plays any explanatory role in accounting for the practice at all.

I make this case by examining how the dynamic might play out in a specific case. Here, I use our judgment of desert as an example. If we examine how we use our judgment of desert, we see that it is a complex hodgepodge of different practical effects, needs, and functions. In some cases, we use judgments of desert to guilt trip the blamed into doing what the blamer desires. In some other cases, we use judgments of desert to track certain facts about the agent: whether the blamed really have the kind of control that makes them appropriate for blame.

Prima facie, each kind of case would lead us to a different potential explanation.¹⁷ From the guilt-tripping cases, we might explain desert as merely an instrument of influence. We can present such an account in the basic explanatory pattern as the following:

- (1) Having the idea of desert (and practices associated with it) could have the practical effect of permitting judgments of desert and enabling the practice of guilt-tripping the blamed into doing what the blamer desires.

¹⁷ Here, one could even make the stronger point that these two potential explanations are not just different but incompatible. They are incompatible in the sense that the guilt-tripping explanation would destabilize the just desert explanation. If the guilt-tripping explanation were true, it would mean our judgment of deserts is only sensitive to our desire to influence others. Even if we admit that our judgments of desert track features of our agency, our judgment, in practice, would be systematically erroneous (since we are not responsive to features of responsible agency). This would lead us to doubt whether our judgments track features of responsible agency in the first place.

- (2) We have the need to exert influence upon each other. And being able to guilt trip could satisfy our need to exert influence.
- (3) Having the idea of desert (and practices associated with it) could have the function of allowing us to exert influence upon each other.

From the control tracking cases, we might draw a radically different explanation that desert is a way to ensure we justly hold others responsible. We can present such an account in the basic explanatory pattern as the following:

- (1) Having the idea of desert (and practices associated with it) could have the practical effect of permitting judgments of desert and allowing us to track features of responsible agency (such as reason responsiveness or certain kinds of volitional structure).
- (2) We have the need to track whether the blamed genuinely/justly deserved¹⁸ to be held responsible. And being able to track features of responsible agency could satisfy our need to track whether the blamed is genuinely/justly deserved.
- (3) Having the idea of desert (and practices associated with it) could have the function of ensuring we justly hold others responsible.

Since we have experiences of both kinds of cases, we can consider both to be a part of our intuitive understanding of the practice. In turn, an account that can accommodate both would be

¹⁸ Spelling out a precise sense of “genuinely deserved to be held responsible” (some time referred to as basic desert) is notoriously difficult. However, the fact that we have the intuition that in some cases an agent genuinely deserved to be held responsible should be clear.

more successful than an account that can only accommodate one. The intuition claim claims that genealogy is particularly good at generating the kind of accounts that can accommodate both.

Indeed, a genealogical reconstruction could help us extend both potential explanations to accommodate the other cases the explanation has not been taken into account. In turn, genealogy would give us two more fruitful explanations.

Take just desert account for example.¹⁹ In the state of nature, we can posit that human beings need to cooperate. But not all of the people in our community are reliable cooperators. In such circumstances, we have a need to recognize the unreliable cooperators. Yet, we cannot take every failure as an indication of the agent's unreliability. Even reliable agents can fail due to factors outside of their control. Given these conditions, we adopt the judgment of desert. Such judgments help us reliably distinguish accidental failings that should not be attributed to an agent from failings that can be imputed to the agent. With such judgments, we are able to more reliably respond appropriately to the unreliable cooperators.

However, since the judgment of desert developed to allow us to appropriately react to the unreliable cooperators, our judgment of desert is intertwined with the social practice of exerting influence upon each other. This also opens the door for the judgment of desert to be used as an instrument of manipulation. This would explain those cases in which our judgments of desert are used to satisfy the desire to influence others.

But does this mean we now have a potential explanation that is more successful than either account we have posited initially? I think not. Here, the important question is what kind of

¹⁹ Here, the example is based on Pettit's genealogy of moral responsibility from (Pettit 2018). The discussion of the manipulative cases is my addition.

information we should accommodate in a successful potential explanation. The fact that we have experiences of both kinds of ways of using judgments of desert does not entail that we should accommodate both into our explanation. Without any further justification, it remains an open question which kind of cases we should accommodate.

Take for example those who defend an account of desert solely as a judgment (responsive to certain facts about the agent). Defenders of such an account would resist the suggestion that we should accommodate manipulative cases. This is because under such an account these manipulative cases do not properly involve the judgment of desert at all. If these acts of manipulation fail to be judgments of desert at all, we certainly should not include these cases as part of our intuitive understanding of the practice. Of course, at this point, there is still room for us to insist that we should accommodate these cases. But to make this move, we need to provide additional reasons.

The critical point is that there is simply no neutral standard by which we can decide which information should be accommodated. There is little reason for us to take our intuitive understanding of the practice as the neutral ground, especially if we take such understanding to be some kind of common-sense experience of the practice. Even if we accept that we have understanding of this kind, it is still unclear why it should serve as a neutral ground by which we determine which account is more successful.

But when we give up on the idea of using our intuitive understanding as a neutral ground, it also becomes unclear if and how the reconstructive process contributes to generating successful potential explanations. There are four ways we can treat the two kinds of cases that we use the judgment of desert:

1. We admit both kinds of cases in our explanation.
2. We take the first kind of cases as exemplars for our judgment of desert. And we reject the second kind of cases as a distraction.
3. We take the second kind of cases as exemplar for our judgment of desert. And we reject the first kind of cases as a distraction.
4. We reject both kinds of cases.

The intuition claim would have us believe that the reconstructive process is a good way for us to generate successful potential explanations, by virtue of pursuing the first route. But as we have just seen, we cannot assess which route is more successful independent from a criterion that specifies the kind of information we should accommodate.

Crucially, the reconstructive process by itself does not give us such a criterion. In turn, for a reconstructive process to generate a successful potential explanation in the first place, we need to find the criteria elsewhere. To find such a criterion, we need to appeal to an account that gives us, at least, a basic conception of the practice (as we have seen in the example of those who defend desert as solely a judgment). But if we have a sufficiently detailed account of this kind, it is hard to see how the corresponding potential explanation does not trivially follow.

In the end, it is unclear in what sense the reconstructive process contributes to the success of the potential explanation. If anything deserves the credit for the success of a potential explanation, it is the sufficiently detailed account. After all, it gives us all the guidance we need to construct the potential explanation, with or without the reconstructive process.

At this point, we see the fundamental flaw of taking genealogy to have a crucial explanatory role: what ultimately does the explanatory work is the account being represented by genealogy, rather than genealogy itself. This is not to deny the fruitfulness of Craig's genealogy of knowledge, William's genealogy of truthfulness, or Pettit's genealogy of moral responsibility. Rather, they are fruitful not because they are genealogies but because of the content of their account.

On the contrary, the vindicator's (over)emphasizing the explanatory role of genealogies robs our attention away from the genuine reasons that the vindicators have provided to support their accounts. This obfuscates the fact that these accounts fundamentally pursue the same kind of project as other accounts of the phenomenon in question, blocking potentially fruitful lines of engagement.

Conclusion

In this paper, I offer an assessment of the vindicators' claim that genealogy plays a distinctive and substantive explanatory role in vindication. I begin by investigating how genealogies can vindicate. I argue the most plausible way to understand how genealogies vindicate is to take them to be potential explanations. However, as we work out an answer to the question, we also see the explanatory role genealogy plays is neither distinctive nor substantive. In fact, what does the explanatory work in the potential explanations are the accounts that genealogies present. Let this paper be a call to rid vindicatory genealogies of their genealogical guise so that they can be assessed for their content rather than their form.

This being said, I think there are other ways that genealogy could be useful for vindication. We need not give genealogy explanatory roles as strong as the vindicators have hoped. For instance,

we could take genealogies to be primarily pedagogical devices. While one could in principle present potential explanations in other ways, genealogies give us a helpful way to present the explanation in an accessible way. In this way, genealogies would serve a similar role to how the state of nature is used in political philosophy (by philosophers such as Hobbes and Nozick).

Of course, given their aspirations, the vindicators would dismiss such routes as making too thin a use of genealogies.²⁰ I think the vindicators may have been overly optimistic about genealogy's explanatory potential for vindication, given genealogy's success in debunking. But given the arguments above, the vindicators should accept the asymmetry between the two enterprises: if we aim to vindicate, we cannot let genealogies have an explanatory role as substantive as they have in debunking.

²⁰ Some later commentators such as Queloz have explicitly make this claim in (queloz2021a ch. 1).

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