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Genealogy: A conceptual map

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Abstract

The blossoming literature on genealogy in recent years has come as somewhat of a pleasant surprise to the historically inclined among us. It has not, however, come without its difficulties. As I see it, the literature on genealogy is guilty of two conflations, what I call the "debunking/problematizing conflation" and the "problematizing/rationalizing conflation." Both are the result of the inadequate typological maps currently used to organize the literature. As a result, what makes many genealogies philosophically interesting often remains obscure. In response, I propose a new two-dimensional typology that avoids these conflations and outfits us with a richer conceptual vocabulary with which to understand and organize the genealogies which populate the literature. By identifying a second dimension of analysis which has thus far gone untheorized, my typology enables us to elucidate the various normative objectives and objects of investigation structuring a literature which is more diverse than previously acknowledged. We can thus get a clearer understanding of the problems those genealogies face, of their critical potential, and of their implications for our conception of critique.

KEYWORDS
background frameworks, Brandom, debunking, debunking/problematizing conflation, Foucault, genealogy, genetic fallacy, problematizing, problematizing/rationalizing conflation, rationalizing, self-defeat, two-dimensional typology, vindicatory, Wittgenstein

A philosophical problem has the form: "I don't know my way about."

– Ludwig Wittgenstein, *PI* §123[1]

1 | INTRODUCTION

The blossoming literature on genealogy in recent years has come as somewhat of a pleasant surprise to the historically inclined among us. It has not, however, come without its problems. The literature on genealogy is, I think, organized around two overarching conflations. These conflations are related: if the first is avoided, the second is often committed instead. Both conflations preclude an accurate apprehension of the diversity of genealogies in the literature, their distinguishing features, and the challenges they face. Indeed, the two objections most commonly raised against genealogy—the genetic fallacy and self-defeat objections—each present serious problems for the viability of genealogy. However, both objections are often inappropriately leveled against genealogies that do not seem to be susceptible to them due to overgeneralizations resulting from these conflations. Disentangling our understanding of genealogy from these two conflations and the pervasive misconceptions which depend on them can therefore help us to clarify the circumstances under which these objections go through (and why) and when they fail (and why). As I shall show, a new two-dimensional typology can help us to better assess the viability and philosophical value of genealogy.

The literature on genealogy is typically organized according to either a bipartite or tripartite typology. According to the bipartite typology, genealogies fall into one of two categories: what are sometimes called *debunking genealogies* and *vindicatory genealogies*.[2] Broadly construed, debunking genealogies *undermine* our beliefs and vindicatory genealogies *legitimate* our beliefs. Archetypes of the former include Hume's naturalistic critique of religion and Xenophanes' ironic interrogation of the anthropomorphism of the gods (*DK* 21B14-6; Hume, 1990).[3] Archetypes of the latter include Bernard Williams', Edward Craig's, and Philip Pettit's state of nature arguments about the emergence of the virtues of truth, the concept of knowledge, and ethics, respectively (Craig, 1991; Pettit, 2018; Williams, 2002).

The issue with the bipartite typology is that it is unable to account for an important class of genealogies—paradigms of which include Friedrich Nietzsche's, Michel Foucault's, and Judith Butler's genealogies of Christian morality, the modern French penal system, and the category of "woman," respectively (Butler, 2006; Foucault, 1975; Nietzsche, 2008)—which certainly aren't vindicatory yet aren't exactly debunking either, at least not in the same way that Hume's and Xenophanes' are. These genealogies are instances of what has been called *problematizing genealogy*. The first conflation arises from a pervasive misunderstanding of the kinds of objects problematizing genealogy targets, the result being that they are often lumped together with debunking genealogy despite important differences in their argumentative structures and the broader critical projects in which they are situated. As a result, the distinctive features of some of the literature's most interesting genealogies are frequently overlooked or misconstrued and are often subject to inappropriate standards of assessment. Let's call this first conflation the *debunking/problematizing conflation*.[4]

Cognisant of the threat of the debunking/problematizing conflation, some contributors, most notably Allen (2008, 2010) and Koopman (2013), have made use of a *tri*partite typology. Where debunking and vindicatory genealogies undermine and legitimate our beliefs respectively, problematizing genealogy is *normatively neutral* because it does not stipulate the attitudes we are required to adopt toward our beliefs. Rather, it draws critical attention to the structure of what we might call our *background frameworks*, the discursive formations which delimit what we can even think of designating *as* potential objects of belief in the first place. Examples include the conceptual apparatuses which figure in belief and judgment, the cognitive and perceptual capacities and dispositions of epistemic agents, the social and historical context of utterance, and patterns of other presupposed beliefs. They are the discursive landscapes on which belief stands out in relief, the banks through which the river of belief flows. The

tripartite typology can thus be represented as a normative spectrum with debunking and vindicatory genealogies at each end and problematizing genealogy staking out the neutral mid-point.

The second conflation risks being smuggled in at this point on the back of an ambiguity arising from problematizing genealogy's distinctive structure. Problematizing genealogy is unique for its possession of two faces, one oriented toward the past, the other toward the future. Although (putatively) normatively neutral, problematizing genealogy retains its critical force by leveraging the interrelation between its past- and future-oriented components. Problematizing genealogy's past-oriented component seeks to trace the historical processes which have constructed our background frameworks, the discursive spaces which delimit what we can even countenance as an object of belief. If the conclusion of that investigation is that the structure of the background framework in question is accidental and could have been otherwise, problematizing genealogy's future-oriented component aims to expand the field of discursive possibilities by creating the space for the designation of new objects of belief.[5] The confusion consists in thinking that the future-oriented component of problematizing genealogy is a distinct form of genealogy and not the complementary extension of problematizing genealogy's past-oriented component.

Additionally, drawing a distinction between the past- and future-oriented components of problematizing genealogy precludes appropriate recognition of recent work by Brandom (2019), Dutilh Novaes (2015), and Queloz (2021). Although the genealogies they present also seek to reorganize the discursive landscape, they do so by identifying the rational and practical norms lying unarticulated in our existing discursive practices rather than by expanding the discursive field. I call this kind of genealogy *rationalizing genealogy*. We can thus call this second confusion the *problematizing/rationalizing conflation*.

The problematizing/rationalizing conflation results from the continued use of the limited hermeneutical resources provided by the single (normative) dimension of analysis along which the bipartite typology is organized. We thus cannot untangle it simply by adding another category to our typology for a yet more fine-grained analysis. Instead, we must rethink the *structure* of our typology. I hence propose a *two-dimensional* typology of genealogy. It adopts the *normative* dimension (*X*-axis) from the bipartite and tripartite typologies are organized but adds to it a dimension which tracks the *kind of object* investigated (*Y*-axis). Looking along the *X*-axis, debunking and problematizing genealogies are undermining, and vindicatory and rationalizing genealogies are legitimating. Looking along the *Y*-axis, debunking and vindicatory genealogies investigate the rational status of our beliefs, and problematizing and rationalizing genealogies investigate the background frameworks in which those beliefs are situated. The picture that emerges is of a 2 × 2 matrix (Figure 1).

With its enriched analytical vocabulary, my proposed typology is both better able to account for the diversity of extant genealogies in the literature than the bipartite and tripartite typologies and better able to organize them in such a way as to make salient their distinctive features, similarities, and differences. In so doing, it is also able to rectify the confusions which presently permeate the literature.[6]

Finally, while there are genealogies which straddle the boundaries of my typology, it is not the purpose of this paper to present an exhaustive conceptual analysis of the necessary and sufficient conditions a genealogy must exhibit to count as an instance of one of the quadrants of the typology—even though I do think that my typology

	Undermining	Legitimating
Doxastic	Debunking genealogy	Vindicatory genealogy
Background	Problematizing genealogy	Rationalizing genealogy

FIGURE 1 The two-dimensional typology.

does a better job of tracing the contours of the literature on genealogy than the existing typologies we have to work with—nor is it an exercise in philosophical housekeeping. I instead conceive of this paper as an instance of what Laura Valentini calls "conceptual cartography" (Valentini, 2012, p. 655). Typologies are not just ways of "carving nature at the joints" as philosophers are so fond of saying. Whatever else they may be or do, typologies are also maps that help us to navigate a particular domain of inquiry. But the accuracy of the typology, the validity of the classifications, and the nature of the relations between them are all determined relative not to any essential shared features of the items in question, but to the investigative and practical purposes we manifest in considering the features of some set of objects as relevantly similar at all. In the present case, my investigative purpose is to clarify the problems facing genealogy and its philosophical prospects. It is in this sense that I do not conceive of my two-dimensional typology as tracking differences in *kind*, but rather simply as a map to help us negotiate unfamiliar philosophical terrain.

2 | DOXASTIC GENEALOGIES

Debunking and vindicatory genealogies constitute the two halves of the bipartite typology. While they are undertaken in pursuit of opposing normative objectives, they nevertheless both examine the ground-level epistemic statuses of our beliefs. Debunking and vindicatory genealogies face two objections: the genetic fallacy objection and the self-defeat objection. Both objections can be defused (with varying levels of success and at varying philosophical cost) when appropriately qualified.

Both debunking and vindicatory genealogies prompt us to revise our beliefs by providing accounts of their histories. In the former case, the historical story aims to *undermine* the epistemic standing of the belief while the historical story told in the latter case aims to *legitimate* the belief. This is typically achieved by showing, in the debunking case, that the process by which we came to hold the belief is epistemically unreliable or, in the vindicatory case, that our believing it serves some practical purpose. Both debunking and vindicatory genealogies make substantive claims about what we *ought* to believe or about the attitudes we *ought* to adopt toward our beliefs. It is in this sense that debunking and vindicatory genealogies are doxastic.

While exhibiting important similarities, debunking and vindicatory genealogies arrive at their intended conclusions on the basis of distinct argumentative mechanisms. Debunking genealogies typically attempt to achieve their undermining objective by showing that the belief in question is the result of an "off-track process" (Kahane, 2011; Rini, 2016; Sauer, 2018; Srinivasan, 2015, 2019; Street, 2006). An off-track belief-forming process is a belief-forming process which does not reliably track the truth of the matter. Two examples of debunking genealogy which exhibit this reliance on unreliability particularly clearly are evolutionary debunking arguments and ideology as false consciousness. Evolutionary debunking arguments, a subspecies of debunking genealogies, contend that moral beliefs which depend on our moral intuitions do not track the moral truth because our moral intuitions are the products of natural selective pressures which are sensitive to the exigencies of survival and the propagation of our genes, not to moral truths.[7] We thus have reason to believe that our moral beliefs do not track the moral truth as it would push the limits of plausibility to suggest that we just happened to arrive at it by chance. Indeed, just think of how frequently we arrive at conflicting moral beliefs on the basis of our moral intuitions. Similarly, ideology as false consciousness contends that our beliefs systematically fail to track truths about the nature of society due to the distorting influence of our social position relative to some material social structure such as capitalist production, the gendered division of labor, and a racially stratified social hierarchy.[8] As in all cases of debunking genealogy, both evolutionary debunking arguments and ideology as false consciousness leverage the histories of our beliefs to argue that they lack rational warrant, the consequence being that we are obliged to lower our credence in them.

Vindicatory genealogies attempt to legitimate our beliefs in an altogether different manner. Rather than showing our beliefs to be the result of an *on*-track belief forming process—although doing so would also obviously function as a (non-genealogical) vindication of a belief's rational standing—vindicatory genealogies attempt to reveal the needs

our beliefs satisfy and the practices they serve to support (Queloz, 2021; Williams, 2002). As the story goes, if it can be shown that a belief and its attendant practices satisfy some genuine human need, then, because it serves a functionally necessary role in facilitating the achievement of some end we endorse, the belief in question is to that extent vindicated. The specifically *historical* component of a vindicatory genealogy is introduced through a heuristic device: the state of nature. Williams, for instance, deploys an (imaginary) state of nature argument to vindicate what he calls the two virtues of truthfulness: Sincerity and Accuracy. The state of nature he defines is populated with beings organized in small groups with minimally assumed needs for communication and cooperation. The virtues of truthfulness would emerge, so he contends, in order to meet those needs given equally minimal assumptions about the facts of human psychology and sociology. Williams' argument is that the virtues of truthfulness that would emerge in the state of nature are functionally identical to the norms surrounding our actual conception of truthfulness, meaning that we can assert the counterfactual claim that even if we *hadn't* developed the virtues of truthfulness we actually did, we *would* have developed ones that served the same functions. Our *actual* virtues of truthfulness are thereby shown to be genuinely responsive to some basic human needs found in all human societies. As we derive some benefit from them, they are thereby legitimated.

3 | TWO OBJECTIONS

Having briefly elaborated debunking and vindicatory genealogies (which are assumed to be the only forms of genealogy according to the bipartite typology), we can now examine the two main objections leveled against genealogy. As I will show, these objections are far less successful once we have a proper view of the diversity of genealogies which populate the literature and recognize that some are not concerned with the rational status of our beliefs at all but rather with the background frameworks within which things are rendered intelligible *as* the possible objects of belief in the first place.

3.1 | The genetic fallacy objection

The genetic fallacy has been formulated in a variety of ways over the past 100 years (Cohen & Nagel, 1934; Copi, 1982; Crouch, 1993; Engel, 1986; Goudge, 1961; Salmon, 1973). As it is most commonly understood today, one commits the genetic fallacy by drawing conclusions about the veracity of a belief on the basis of facts about its history. Such reasoning is (ostensibly) fallacious because the origin or process of development of a belief (ostensibly) has no bearing on its truth or falsity. Because there are no logical relations between the two sets of propositions at stake, the genetic fallacy is, like an ad hominem, a fallacy of *irrelevance*. As should already be clear, the kinds of beliefs ruled out from holding legitimate evidential purport in the assessment of a claim are those about the *history* of the claim. The genetic fallacy is hence, according to Margaret A. Crouch, "the expression of a rule regarding the kind of information that can count as evidence for or against a claim" (Crouch, 1993, p. 235).

The genetic fallacy is obviously correct in a number of cases. If, for instance, a genealogical investigation into a belief *P* (where *P* is the belief "there is a plane flying overhead right now") reveals that I believe *P* only because, unbeknown to me, someone had slipped a large dose of hallucinogenic drugs into my coffee, I would seem to have reason to give up my belief that *P* because beliefs formed under the influence of hallucinogens are notoriously unreliable. Such an investigation, on the basis of the process by which the belief is formed, seems to show that the evidential relation between the world and my cognitive state is unable to support continued endorsement of the belief. The issue with this genealogical story is that even if the grounds on which I base my belief that *P* do not reliably track the truth, *P* may still be true since the facts in virtue of which *P* is true may nevertheless obtain. This means that should a debunking or vindicatory genealogy claim to show that our beliefs are true or false, then it is indeed fallacious and the genetic fallacy objection is successful.

The genetic fallacy objection can, however, be circumvented in two ways. First, we can simply modify our expectations about the kinds of claims debunking and vindicatory genealogies are able to make. Doing just that, Hanno Sauer claims that debunking arguments, of which debunking genealogies are a subset, "do not show their target beliefs to be false, but rather undermine the justification a subject may have for holding them" (Sauer, 2018, p. 29). On this understanding, debunking genealogies do not provide definitive reason to think that a belief is *false*, but they do provide reason to think that the *justification* for holding it is bunk. As Sauer continues, "because debunking arguments are a type of undercutting defeat rather than a direct attack against the truth of a proposition, debunking … arguments are essentially about moving the burden of proof around" (Sauer, 2018, p. 214). And while undermining the justifications for a belief may not be as argumentatively powerful as showing it to be false, an argument able to shift the burden of proof around is still a valuable instrument to have in our philosophical toolkit. The same considerations hold, mutatis mutandis, for vindicatory genealogy.

The second way that the genetic fallacy objection can be defused is by turning to causal accounts of knowledge. Causal accounts of knowledge contend that a belief satisfies the justification condition on knowledge if it is the result of a chain of causation leading back to the state of affairs making the belief true. Since they rely on facts about the history of our beliefs to determine their justifiability, this means that causal accounts of knowledge are a form of genetic argument. However, even if it turns out that causal accounts of knowledge are implausible, they are anything but fallacious. If my belief that *P* can be traced back to the vibrations in the air caused by the plane's engines reaching my eardrums, activating my vestibulocochlear nerve, and transmitting electrical impulses to the auditory cortex of my brain, then the belief is justified and hence an item of knowledge. Indeed, it is precisely the history of my belief which establishes the relation between the propositional content of the belief and the state of affairs whose obtaining is something to be believed. It is that relation which locks my having the belief onto the truth of the state of affairs it is about.

However, just as our beliefs' causal histories ensure that they track the truth of a particular state of affairs, there are also cases in which one's beliefs are, as Kevin C. Klement puts it, "the result of a chain of causation involving a state of affairs making [the belief] false" (Klement, 2002, p. 388). Such processes, which we might call *truth-averse*, provide grounds for claiming not just that a belief is unjustified, but that it is *false*. Although it is (thankfully) true, as Klement continues, that "our cognitive abilities are not set up in such a way that it is very often the case that a certain state of affairs can *cause* us to believe in a contrary state of affairs" in most normal cases of the perception of medium-sized dry goods, it is less clear that this is the case in other important contexts (Klement, 2002, p. 388). Accounts of ideology as false consciousness, for instance, typically hinge on the claim that we erroneously attribute an objective character to elements of the social world precisely because our beliefs about them are the normal result of pathologies in the material systems of which they are reflections (Marx & Engels, 1974).[9] Both the truth-tracking and truth-averse cases show that while there are indeed cases in which the source of a claim is irrelevant to the assessment of its veracity, genealogical reasoning, as Crouch claims, cannot be said to be fallacious "*simply* because it is about the source of the claim [own emphasis]" (Crouch, 1993, p. 239).[10]

While debunking and vindicatory genealogies are by no means immune to the genetic fallacy objection, that is a far cry from the categorical claim that they should be dismissed out of hand as fallacious instances of unsound reasoning. While some genealogies may indeed be fallacious, their fallaciousness will be a result of the specifics of their formulation, not merely their membership of a type.

3.2 | The self-defeat objection

Defusing the genetic fallacy objection leads us directly to a second, less tractable problem. If we are able to show that a belief is the result of an unreliable belief-forming process, the question that must now be answered is how reliable our determination of unreliability is. If it turns out that the beliefs we have about our belief-forming processes are themselves the result of unreliable belief-forming processes, then by its own lights the genealogy's own

justificatory status lapses. This raises the threat of self-defeat since the genealogist threatens to undermine the foundations of her own argument by unwittingly implicating either the standards against which her genealogy is to be assessed or the assumptions on which it is based. Whereas the genetic fallacy objection raises an external concern about the relevance of a belief's history for its assessment on the basis of independent considerations of evidential purport, the self-defeat objection relates to genealogy's logical structure, its entailments, and its presuppositions.

The self-defeat objection is typically formulated in one of two ways: as an epistemic objection and as an objection relating to the normative standards genealogy assumes.[11] Regarding the former, Amia Srinivasan points out that debunking genealogy hinges on being able to accurately distinguish between belief-forming processes with reliably track (or avoid) the truth from those which do so unreliably (Srinivasan, 2015, 2019).[12] This leads to a dilemma. On the one hand, we risk begging the question against the genealogical skeptic. The distinction between reliable and unreliable belief-forming processes cannot be determined except in reference to the beliefs they generate since it is precisely their patterns of veracity which decides if the process which generated them is reliable. This is, however, exactly the issue at stake. On the other hand, should it be claimed that we can determine the reliability of belief-forming processes through a special method then we risk embarking on a regress since doing so assumes that the special method has itself been determined to be reliable. The reliability of the special method would also presumably have to be determined by some further method whose own reliability must be determined, and so on ad infinitum. It thus seems that debunking genealogy cuts its epistemic foundations out from beneath itself.

Understood as an objection relating to genealogy's normative standards, the self-defeat objection is most influentially articulated by Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser in their critiques of Foucault. Habermas contends that Foucault can only ground the critical force of his genealogies "by not thinking genealogically about his *own* genealogical historiography" (Habermas, 1987, p. 269). Similarly, Fraser argues that Foucault makes use of genealogy as a critical methodology in an attempt to be "both politically engaged and normatively neutral" yet nevertheless "sometimes appears not to have suspended the liberal norms [of legitimacy and illegitimacy] after all but, rather, to be presupposing them" (Fraser, 1989, p. 19).[13] Foucault's genealogies, it is claimed, either do not have the normative resources required for a politically efficacious critique or rely on the very norms he claims to have suspended. The underlying dilemma is that Foucault can avoid the self-defeat objection, but only at a high cost to his broader critical project, namely genealogy's normative retreat to a heuristic device unable to rationally motivate critical social transformation. As I argue in Section 6 however, getting a clearer view of the targets of Foucault's genealogies and the form of their normative ambitions suggests that Habermas' and Fraser's articulation of the self-defeat objection may indeed be applicable to some genealogies in the literature, they are wide of the mark as objections to Foucault.

It's worth noting at this point that the self-defeat objection applies only to the debunking half of the bipartite typology for the simple reason that vindicatory genealogies do not undermine anything at all, let alone their own foundations. Since it is also perfectly possible to defuse genetic fallacy objections leveled against vindicatory genealogies—and since they are not, I think, victim to the conflations which otherwise pervade the literature—I will set consideration of them aside for now.

4 | BACKGROUND FRAMEWORKS

Some readers are likely to have noticed a perspicuous lacuna in the argument presented thus far as one of the most important instances of genealogy (both historically and conceptually) has yet to figure in my discussion. While genealogies have been made use of throughout the history of philosophy, Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality* stands as the first example of genealogy used as an explicitly theorized philosophical methodology. Nietzsche's *Genealogy* aims to leverage the history and development of Christian morality in an attempt to undermine Christian moral values by revealing the supposedly real reasons underlying our endorsement of them. We do not, according to Nietzsche, believe in the virtues of humility, charity, or compassion because they are reflections of the divine in man or a

reasoned glimpse upon objective moral norms, but because, through a complex series of interactions between the *ressentiment* of slaves toward their masters, the infliction of pain as a credit repayment device, and the will to power of ascetic priests, the weak developed an ideological system which fettered the strong in order to satisfy their psycho-physiological need for revenge. Since we would have believed *whichever* moral values would have served that function, our moral beliefs do not reliably track the truth of the matter. This means that whichever justifications we previously held for them are subject to an undercutting defeater. The *Genealogy* is, on this construal, an archetypical debunking genealogy.

However, this does not tell the whole story. Nietzsche makes it clear in the *Preface* that he is not—or at least not primarily—interested in the rational or justificatory status of our moral beliefs because what "we stand in need of [is] a *critique* of moral values, *the value of these values itself should first of all be called into question* [emphasis in original]" (*GM* P:6). Since our moral beliefs may be valuable for us for any number of reasons (such as helping to stave off "suicidal nihilism" [*GM* III:28] to mention just one) regardless of whether or not they are justified, this suggests that while the unreliability argument may indeed be part of the *Genealogy's* story, it is by no means all of it.[14]

Yet, Nietzsche's point is not merely that the practical consequences of our beliefs require theorizing. While he certainly does devote considerable attention to an analysis of the effects that certain patterns of adherence to certain moral values have on the structure of social relations, this rests on his accounts of physiological types, historical "forces," and the will to power. The specifically *genealogical* component of his analysis is instead to be found in his attempt to shake us out of the very normative framework in which Christian morality is recognizable as a system of values. With the slavish, negativistic, other-oriented "good/evil" evaluative framework having supplanted the positive, subject-oriented "good/bad" system previously held by the masters, it is not sufficient, Nietzsche claims, merely to renounce or amend our moral beliefs because subscription to the framework in which they are rendered intelligible *as* moral beliefs is independent of endorsement of the moral beliefs themselves (cf. *D* §192; *GS* II:99, III:122, III:146).[15] But if at least part of the *Genealogy* is not concerned with our beliefs at all, instead targeting the normative framework in which our moral beliefs are couched, then understanding Nietzsche as straightforwardly presenting a debunking genealogy is to misread a crucial aspect of his project since debunking genealogy does not have the conceptual resources to account for it.

To fully understand the inadequacy of the present construal of the category of debunking genealogy, we must turn to Foucault and Ludwig Wittgenstein, that other famed historicist. Like Nietzsche before him, Foucault is unconcerned with the rational status of our beliefs, still less still with the identification of a "primordial truth fully adequate to its nature" (Foucault, 1984a, p. 78). Instead, the overarching question at the heart of his critical project is, as Tuomo Tiisala puts it, "to enable us to see that which is too close and too much on the surface of what we do, think, and say for us to ordinarily accord any attention to it" (Tiisala, 2017, p. 14). Foucault calls the presuppositions which suffuse our action, thought, and language the "historical *a priori*," a historicized version of Kant's bounds of sense (Foucault, 2001, p. xxiii). Foucault's historical a priori can be usefully illuminated through Wittgenstein's contention that there exists a fixed background in our linguistic practices which is "not consciously arrived at … by following a particular line of thought, but … is anchored in all [one's] *questions and answers*, so anchored that [one] cannot touch it" (*OC* §103).[16] This background is itself not subject to assessments of truth and falsity as it is "the background against which [we] distinguish between true and false" (*OC* §94). Yet, rather than pushing the skeptical line that might be expected at the suggestion that the foundations of our linguistic practices are not consciously arrived at, Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasizes that this system of pre-reflectively accepted presuppositions which defines the language games in which we think and have our being

> is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.
>
> (*OC* §105)

Like Foucault, Wittgenstein indicates here that he is concerned to articulate the structure of the medium through which linguistic activity becomes conceivable as distinctively discursive, not the rational status of the individual propositions which populate it. Following Wittgenstein, we might call these presuppositions our *background frameworks*.

While providing a detailed account of the nature of our background frameworks is a topic unto itself, it will nevertheless do us well to briefly outline how they ought to be regarded for present purposes. The literature is rich with accounts of the various background considerations in and through which we undertake discursive activity.[17] One common way of thinking about background frameworks is as the conceptual resources in terms of which our beliefs are formulated. On this picture, our background frameworks are the hermeneutical tools which structure which aspects of the world, each other, and ourselves are made salient to analysis and which are obscured from view. Yet, while the conceptual resources in terms of which we formulate belief may indeed be constituents of our background frameworks, they can be comprised by any number of different things, beliefs included. For the idea is not simply that debunking and vindicatory genealogies examine the epistemic while Nietzsche and Foucault concern themselves with the conceptual. The relevant distinction is more general and more permissive, and the resulting conception more pluralistic. Our background frameworks should instead be thought of as the system of fixed points in our discursive practices, whatever collection of items must be presupposed for some discursive practice to be intelligible. They are hence distinguished by their *fixity*, their liability to assessment and correction. As Wittgenstein notes,

> I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility.
>
> (*OC* §152)[18]

This enables us to make better sense of Nietzsche's and Foucault's genealogical projects. For rather than simply being interested in genealogizing our concepts, they aim to identify the unarticulated fixed points around which our discursive practices revolve and to understand why we happened to end up with the fixed points we have. We can hence remain agnostic toward whether background frameworks are epistemic, conceptual, practical, or what have you. All that matters is the orienting role they play in discursive activity.

Wittgenstein's relevance for Foucault's and Nietzsche's use of genealogy becomes clear when we consider how the background frameworks in which our linguistic activity inheres and against which it stands in relief are constituted. Whereas Wittgenstein fails to see beyond the brute facticity of our background frameworks because he lacks the historical tools to analyze their constitution, the thread running through Foucault's oeuvre is the concerted attempt to uncover how our background frameworks have been constructed through historically-specific "laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated, or described within it, and for the relations that are affirmed or denied in it" (Foucault, 2002, p. 103).[19] Foucault's objective is hence to develop an analysis of the specific historical "conditions that had to be met for it to be possible to hold a discourse" (Foucault, 2008, p. 36), that is, as Tiisala puts it, to understand the "norms that not only govern how we use concepts in thought and action but, crucially, also *constitute* a space of semantic possibilities that defines what kinds of contents we can so much as recognize as possible candidates to entertain as our thoughts in the present" (Tiisala, 2017, p. 8).[20] Foucault utilizes genealogy not, in other words, to undermine our existing assignments of truth and falsity so as to change our beliefs, but to make visible what can intelligibly appear to us, as Ian Hacking puts it, "as a candidate for being true-or-false" in the first place (Hacking, 1982, p. 48).[21] The key point is that neither Foucault nor Nietzsche are concerned to identify which of our beliefs are true and which false, or which are justified and which aren't, but rather with how to limn the present boundaries of intelligibility.

5 | PROBLEMATIZING GENEALOGY AND THE TRIPARTITE TYPOLOGY

It should be clear at this point that the construal of debunking genealogy outlined in Section 2 is not a suitable account of some of the most textually significant and philosophically compelling instances of genealogy. However,

the cause of this unsuitability is not the result of a deficient characterization of debunking genealogy that could be honed through additional qualification and specification, but rather due to the limitations of the bipartite typology in which both debunking and vindicatory genealogies are situated. The bipartite typology assumed thus far organizes debunking and vindicatory genealogies according to their normative objectives, viz. undermining or legitimating our beliefs. Yet, neither Nietzsche nor Foucault are primarily interested in our beliefs at all. Instead, they are interested in the constitution of the discursive space in which it is possible to imagine certain instances of propositional content as things to be believed. That Nietzsche and Foucault are mischaracterized is hence a result of the bipartite typology itself lacking the conceptual resources to articulate their distinctive purposes.

In response to this lacuna, Allen and Koopman propose a third category of genealogy: *problematizing genealogy* (Allen, 2008, 2010; Koopman, 2013).[22] Unlike debunking genealogy which undermines the rational status of our beliefs, problematizing genealogy transforms previously given features of social reality into problems requiring solutions. By highlighting the thoroughgoing contingency of the historical processes which have constituted the background framework in question, problematizing genealogy recasts the unreflectively accepted landscape on which linguistic activity plays out into an issue demanding critical investigation. Recognizing just how easily we might have engaged with the world differently is the kind of fact which, as Wittgenstein puts it, places one "into a position in which [they] could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which [one is] … torn away from the *sureness* of the game" (*OC* §617). By presenting us with a historical narrative about the construction of bourgeois sexuality, the notion of a "pre-discursive" sex, and Christian morality, Foucault, Butler, and Nietzsche each attempt to unsettle our confidence in the aptness of the background frameworks we have until now taken for granted and undermine our sense of the felicity of the judgments articulated in their terms. As Bonnie Sheehey articulates it, problematization does not "lay[…] down prescriptions, prophecies, or programs for behaviour" but instead "challenges … familiar systems of thought so as to defamiliarize, problematize, or make them strange" (Sheehey, 2020, p. 71). We thus might call the confusion above the *debunking/problematizing conflation*.

How, then, should we characterize the relationship between the three forms of genealogy we have identified so far? Where debunking and vindicatory genealogies aim to undermine and support our beliefs respectively, Koopman claims that problematizing genealogy is normatively "neutral" (Koopman, 2013, p. 60). This is because it does not engage in what Sheehey calls "the normatively ambitious work of judgement" (Sheehey, 2020, p. 69). Instead, problematizing genealogy interrogates why some object of inquiry has been designated as having the potential to hold a rational status at all, thereby rendering it open to analysis when previously it was not. Whether we should endorse or reject the object of analysis is a question problematizing genealogy is agnostic toward since, as Sakari Säynäjoki and Tiisala note, it "provides no direction to the work of freedom it enables" (Säynäjoki & Tiisala, 2023, p. 151).[23]

With problematizing genealogy construed as normatively neutral, we can now outline the structure of the tripartite typology. Just as the bipartite typology distributes the different forms of genealogy along a normative dimension of analysis, the tripartite typology places debunking, vindicatory, and problematizing genealogies along a normative spectrum. Debunking and vindicatory genealogies sit at the poles while problematizing genealogy occupies the midpoint (Figure 2).

Alongside its ability to account for a swathe of important genealogies, the tripartite typology holds two additional advantages over the bipartite typology. First, the tripartite typology enables us to further refine the applicability of the genetic fallacy and self-defeat objections. Regarding the former, since problematizing genealogy does not
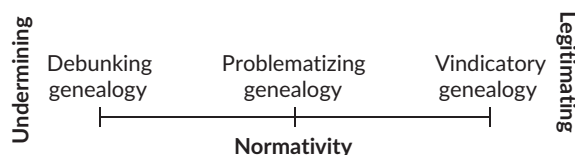

FIGURE 2 The tripartite typology.

make determinate claims about the veracity or justificatory status of particular beliefs but rather examines the conditions under which linguistic activity is designated as subject to ascriptions of veracity or justification in the first place, the genetic fallacy does not seem to apply to it at all. Genetic fallacy objections leveled against problematizing genealogies hence need not be defused; they simply do not land. Things are trickier regarding the self-defeat objection, however. On the one hand, problematizing genealogy does not seem to risk cutting its own foundations out from beneath itself because, being normatively neutral, it does not undermine anything at all. On the other hand, it seems unreasonable to claim, as shall be discussed in further detail in Section 8, that attempting to "tear us away from the sureness of the game" is not an attempt to undermine it.

The second advantage of the tripartite typology is that it facilitates analysis of the specifically *political* import of many genealogies. One of Wittgenstein's worries is that the backgrounds in which our linguistic activity has its being may surreptitiously constrain the possible results of that activity in such a way as to preclude an accurate apprehension of the world. This is because the background frameworks we use may prompt us, as he puts it, to "think[...] that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it" (*PI* §114). The implication is twofold: first, that there are things we are blind to beyond the horizon of our background frameworks and, second, that we project that horizon onto the world thinking we have discovered it there. Wittgenstein's worry is precisely that we may mistake our background frameworks, historically specific as they are, for the conditions of possibility of linguistic activity as such.

The deeper problem that problematizing genealogy enables us to engage with is that ascribing the status of necessity to a background framework may turn out merely to be a ruse for the effective operation of the forms of power which lace the social world. Foucault (correctly, I think) claims that

> Power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms. Would power be accepted if it were entirely cynical? For it, secrecy is not in the nature of an abuse; it is indispensable to its operation. Not only because power imposes secrecy on those whom it dominates, but because it is perhaps just as indispensable to the latter: would they accept it if they did not see it as a mere limit ..., leaving a measure of freedom— however slight—intact? Power as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability.
>
> (Foucault, 1978, p. 86)[24]

If power must conceal itself lest it be resisted, what better strategy can it pursue than to present itself as an unthinkable background framework in which resistance must itself participate? Imputing necessity to a background framework in this way both renders it unrecognizable as a potential object of resistance and enables it to determine what is conceivable as intelligible resistance to its regime in advance.[25] The worry, of course, is that the background frameworks we seemingly have no choice but to make use of can be organized so as to deliberately inhibit the formulation of possible forms of resistance and thereby maintain the regimes of power they may conceal.

6 | THE NORMATIVITY OF CRITIQUE AND SEMANTIC SELF-DEFEAT

Despite its advantages over the bipartite typology, the tripartite typology runs into two significant problems. The first relates to problematizing genealogy's critical force: how should we think about problematizing genealogy as a tool of critique if it is normatively neutral? If successful, problematizing genealogy shows us that (at least some of) the background frameworks we take to be necessary are in fact historically contingent, that the ways of understanding the world through them are just some among many ways we could understand it. We should be wary, however, of articulating the significance of contingency for genealogy simply in debunking terms. Showing that a background framework has a contingent history may indeed demonstrate that it is not reliably sensitive to the facts of the

matter. *Had* a background framework developed differently we *would have* apprehended what we see through it differently. But merely identifying contingency where once we saw necessity does not on its own serve as a reason to adjust our attitudes toward the background framework in question. It is also a contingent fact that I was raised in a liberal household, but it is not clear whether or why that alone should give me reason to revise my attitudes toward liberal political theory (cf. Knobe & Nichols, 2008, p. 11).

Rather than normatively obliging us to revise our background frameworks, we should, according to Allen and Koopman, think of problematizing genealogy's critical force in terms of its ability to expand the space of discursive possibility—that is, as Sheehey puts it, in terms of its ability to "create[...] ... problems as possible openings for the present work of transformation" (Sheehey, 2020, p. 68). In revealing just how easily our background frameworks could have been different, we are driven to reimagine how else they might have been—and what other forms they could take in the present. Problematizing genealogy's critical import hence lies in the way it carves out new spaces of discursive possibility in which the previously unthinkable can proliferate. As Foucault puts it, the goal of problematizing genealogy is to "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. ... It is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom" (Foucault, 1984b, p. 46).[26]

This highlights problematizing genealogy's most distinctive feature. Problematizing genealogy can be thought of as having two faces: one oriented toward the past, the other oriented toward the future. Its past-oriented component reveals the thoroughgoing contingency of our background frameworks by tracing their often arbitrary processes of construction, identifying the particular ways of going on creatures like us living in cultures like ours find natural to go on, and transforming the previously given into problems requiring philosophical attention. Its future-oriented component, on the other hand, opens up the possibility of new ways of going on and delineating new "truth-value candidates" in the discursive space freshly carved out for it. With this distinction in view, we can see, for instance, that the genealogies of Foucault's middle period (such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*) are primarily past-oriented since they investigate the constitution of penality and bourgeois sexuality as seemingly ubiquitous features of modern society. By comparison, his late work can be seen to be future-oriented given its attention to unstructured ethical experimentation and the new forms of subjectivity such experimentation makes possible. Lorenzini (2020, 2023), Srinivasan (2019), and Dutilh Novaes (2023) have more recently referred to this future-oriented aspect of problematizing genealogy as "possibilising," "worldmaking," and "genealogical effervescence," respectively. On this construal, problematizing genealogy's critical force emerges from the interplay between past- and future-oriented inquiries.

The idea that problematizing genealogy has two faces introduces a distinctively open-ended conception of critique. For Foucault, that is by design: it is precisely the fact that ethical experimentation is not, as Butler puts it, "fully determined in advance" which acts as the condition of possibility for the autonomous use of an agent's reason in the pursuit of freedom for it is exactly testing the feasibility of new truth-value candidates beyond existing forms of intelligibility which, as she continues, resistively "marks the limits to the ordering capacity of the field in question" (Butler, 2002, p. 220). This is also why, as mentioned in Section 3.2, Habermas' and Fraser's normative articulation of the self-defeat objection does not seem to land as an objection to Foucault's use of problematizing genealogy specifically.

Nevertheless, a normatively neutral conception of critique comes at the cost of being able to rationally motivate the adoption of action-guiding principles of conduct. Problematizing genealogy thus risks political inefficaciousness. This problem is all the more pressing given that many problematizing genealogies aspire to inform concrete political practice. Indeed, it is precisely because there are no normative standards against which proposed truth-value candidates can be assessed that commentators such as Seyla Benhabib, Jana Sawicki, Nancy Hartsock, and Martha Nussbaum have questioned the usefulness of Foucault's genealogies (and problematizing genealogy more generally) for emancipatory politics (Benhabib, 1986; Hartsock, 1990; Nussbaum, 1999; Sawicki, 1994). What resources do we have, they ask, to judge what counts as emancipatory progress and what as reactionary backsliding (Forst, 2019; Honneth, 2018; cf. Allen, 2017)?

Worse yet, even a normatively neutral account of problematizing genealogy's critical force is unable to avoid a *semantic* formulation of the self-defeat objection. Recall that problematizing genealogy appeals to normative neutrality to avoid the threat of the self-defeat objection. The thought is that if problematizing genealogy resists passing judgment entirely, then it cannot be said to introduce any judgments inconsistent with its own foundations. But even if we grant that undertaking a problematizing genealogy does not obligate the adoption of any specific attitudes toward our background frameworks, instead merely aiming to trace the outlines of their historical conditions of possibility, the genealogist is still implicitly committed to at least one claim: that she is, on pain of meaninglessness, making determinate claims *about* something. Brandom articulates the point best in noting that "even the [genealogist] … offer[s] contentful *accounts* of our doings (performances and attitudes), accounts that aim to satisfy the distinctive standards of intelligibility, adequacy, and correctness to which they hold themselves" (Brandom, 2019, p. 577).[27] This means that for the genealogist to count as saying anything determinately contentful about our background frameworks at all she must be committed to at least some standards of assessment against which her claims can be evaluated, in turn meaning that she cannot so easily avoid the threat of self-defeat just by pruning her normative ambitions. Whether or not the genealogist explicitly acknowledges those normative commitments is inconsequential: whatever else it may be, problematizing genealogy is not "neutral."

7 | RATIONALIZING GENEALOGY

How might we proceed from here? If it turns out that problematizing genealogy is not normatively neutral after all, what becomes of it as a tool in our critical arsenal? What becomes of the tripartite typology? And can the self-defeat objection be circumvented in some other way? There is, I think, an interesting route out of this philosophical quagmire illuminated by recent work by Brandom, Dutilh Novaes, and Queloz. Their contributions trace the outline of what I think should be considered a distinct form of genealogy which promises to supplement the "direction" presently missing from problematizing genealogy while preserving the space for experimentation characteristic of its form of critique.

We can begin by explicating part of Brandom's expansive Hegelian vision of the determination of conceptual content presented in *A Spirit of Trust*. One of the central axes of his account is what he calls "retrospective recollective rational reconstruction" (Brandom, 2019, p. 430). We can, according to Terry Pinkard, think of this as "a kind of rationalist genealogy" (Pinkard, 2020, p. 111). Brandom's account of rational reconstruction attempts to answer the Lewisian metasemantic question of how, as Jessica Keiser puts it, "a language L is a language of a population P" (Keiser, 2023, p. 18).[28] The significance of this question derives from the Kantian idea that the genuinely binding rational force of a norm can be instituted only if the agents subject to it *take* themselves to be subject to it, that is, if they freely impose it on themselves by *recognizing* its authority. The issue at stake is hence how we might make the background frameworks we contingently happen to inherit our own in order to transform the matter-of-factual ways of going on they exert over our discursive conduct into genuinely binding rational authority.

Brandom argues that we make our background frameworks our own by selecting, from all of the actual uses of a concept in the past, an Ariadne's thread which makes progressively more explicit some implicit content which turns out to have been guiding all of the community's actual uses of the concept all along. The idea is that by genealogizing our concept *uses* we are able to retrospectively discern the conceptual *content* latent in them. The implicit content we have all along been trying to explicitly articulate is what exerts rational authority over the correctness or incorrectness of the uses.

The analogy Brandom employs to explain rational reconstruction is of the judge at common law "charged with deciding whether a novel set of facts warrants the application of a concept" (Brandom, 2019, p. 601). Just as a judge presiding over a case does not have the freedom to choose which previous decisions she can draw on, so too are we unable to choose how our predecessors used the concepts passed down to us, which background frameworks we are acculturated into, or which "ways of going on" we are disposed to go on in. Our judge can nevertheless

choose, from among all the cases she inherits, *which* cases have "*precedential* significance" in the present by designating as relevant those which exert rational pressure on her judgment "according to the norm implicit in the tradition of prior applications" (Brandom, 2019, p. 601). The judge at common law thus simultaneously explicates and institutes the rational authority of the hitherto implicit governing norm by exercising her agency to commit herself to the significance the historical cases she selects have for the present case. We thus make the past concept uses we matter-of-factly inherit our own by imbuing them with normative significance in the present, thereby extending the tradition of which we are a part into the future.

In the same vein, Queloz (2021) and Dutilh Novaes (2015) outline accounts of "pragmatic" and "conceptual" genealogy, respectively. Pragmatic genealogy, as Queloz puts it, "answers the question of why we came to think as we do by reverse-engineering the points of ideas, tracing them to their practical origins, and revealing what they do for us when they function well" (Queloz, 2021, p. 3). Similarly, conceptual genealogy is, for Dutilh Novaes, a means of interrogating "the uncritical assimilation of presuppositions and substantive theoretical choices made along the way in the shaping of a concept, which then come to be viewed as truisms", decisions which we may no longer endorse (Dutilh Novaes, 2015, p. 85). While more explicitly oriented toward the practical than Brandom's rationalist genealogy, the underlying idea is the same: pragmatic and conceptual genealogies empower us to reflectively endorse or reject the ideas we take for granted by retrospectively identifying the practical purposes they serve and asking if we are prepared to continue endorsing them. Just as Brandom's account confers normative significance upon otherwise disparate concept uses in such a way as to make explicit the underlying norm governing their use, pragmatic and conceptual genealogies confer practical significance upon our discursive practices by uncovering the functional roles they play in achieving ends we are free to either endorse or reject.[29] The key point is that pragmatic and conceptual genealogies serve to bring into focus the practical activities our background frameworks either obscure or make visible so that we can consciously choose how to "fashion[...] new concepts and ... evaluat[e] what these concepts should look like" according to ends we wish to pursue (Queloz, 2021, p. 209).

The motivating idea shared by all three accounts is, as Brandom puts it, of "turn[ing] a *past* into a *history*" through the retrospective imposition of a mode of organization onto an otherwise heterogenous set of historical facts (Brandom, 2019, p. 681). Indeed, it is the identification of similarities between those facts which makes explicit their previously unseen normative or practical significance. But unlike the various articulations of the future-oriented component of problematizing genealogy, the modes of organization that can be legitimately proposed are normatively constrained by the *actual* commonalities that obtain between the facts they purport to express. It is these normative constraints, serving as the standards against which a proposal can be assessed, which enable us to introduce the "direction" previously lacking from problematizing genealogy. Adapting Pinkard's terminology, I refer to this kind of genealogy as *rationalizing genealogy*.

Having sketched the outlines of rationalizing genealogy, we are now in a position to identify a second pervasive confusion in the literature: the *problematizing/rationalizing conflation*. For one, it may be tempting to think of problematizing genealogy's future-oriented component as distinct from its past-oriented component. If one also takes rationalizing genealogy to constitute new forms of intelligibility, it is perhaps unsurprising that they might be run together. This would, however, be a mistake. Whereas problematizing genealogy aims to expand the field of discursive possibility by transforming our seemingly compulsory ways of going on into more or less contingent, more or less arbitrary responses to specific historical pressures, rationalizing genealogy gives "contingent concrete actuality the normative form of necessity" in order to retrospectively imbue our ways of going on with genuinely binding normative force (Brandom, 2019, p. 17). But while problematizing genealogy carves out a discursive space to be populated with the results of unguaranteed experimentation, rationalizing genealogy instead aims to make explicit the practically embedded norms *already* implicitly governing our discursive practices so that they might be submitted to reflection. Hence, while rationalizing genealogy does not exactly foreclose the field of discursive possibilities that problematizing genealogy seeks to augment, it does, through the process of retrospective reconstruction, make those possibilities determinate by giving rational shape to the discursive episodes making up the discursive traditions in which we participate.

The problematizing/rationalizing conflation is not, however, the result of mere philosophical tunnel vision, but of the typology with which we navigate the literature. Foucault ([1984b](#)), Allen ([2008](#), [2010](#)), Koopman ([2013](#)), Srinivasan ([2019](#)), Lorenzini ([2020](#), [2023](#)), Queloz ([2020](#), [2021](#)), and Dutilh Novaes ([2015](#)) all contend that their accounts of genealogy are normatively neutral. Yet, with normative ambition being the only category of analysis against which they can be differentiated on the tripartite typology, these sometimes radically distinct accounts of genealogy are seen to constitute a unified type. The conflation arises because those genealogies which do not fit into either debunking or vindicatory categories tend to be amalgamated regardless of any other philosophically significant differences they might have because, having adopted a one-dimensional analytical framework from the bipartite typology, the tripartite typology's conceptual resources are simply not rich enough to accommodate their differences. Confusions abound because, in attempting to distinguish problematizing genealogy from debunking and vindicatory genealogies, the tripartite typology glosses over the diversity to be found within it. The question now is how we should go about enriching our analytical vocabulary so that we might make those differences visible.

8 | TWO DIMENSIONS OF ANALYSIS

Recall that the problem which set us along this path was the threat of self-defeat. In order to defuse it, proponents of the various genealogies we've looked at invoked (at high political and philosophical cost) the idea of normative neutrality. However, this strategy got us no further as the self-defeat objection returned in an even more penetrating semantic form.

But we might ask now why proponents of supposedly normatively neutral genealogies are so keen to play the self-defeat game at all. While it's true that the genealogist cannot problematize a background framework but from within a background framework, one which may itself be subject to the very kinds of problematization she pursues, the force of the self-defeat objection relies on the assumption that the objective of such inquiry is to discover a background framework fully adequate to a complete description of at least some segment of the world (Rorty, [1989](#)). But the drive to find some final justification atop which all others are balanced is to misapprehend a basic element of the nature of linguistic activity. As Wittgenstein frequently reminds us, not only is it impossible to get outside of one's own background framework, but what counts as a final justification in the first place "is not an ungrounded presupposition … [but] an ungrounded way of acting" expressed in the purposes we manifest in inquiry (*OC* §110). This means that while problematizing genealogy may not rest on argumentative bedrock, it need not do so to get a grip on the forms of life of which our background frameworks are contingent and partial expressions. There is thus a sense in which the self-defeat objection goes through against problematizing genealogy, but that is not quite the knockout blow it might at first seem to be.

The upshot of refusing to play the self-defeat game is that we can wholeheartedly embrace the normativity of both problematizing and rationalizing genealogies. Doing so means that we are free to ascribe to problematizing genealogy the critical "direction" necessary for a politically efficacious critique (unless, of course, the aim is unstructured ethical experimentation) and that rationalizing genealogy can institute genuinely authoritative rational norms in the discursive spaces problematizing genealogy opens up. Problematizing and rationalizing genealogies hence undermine and justify in much the same way as debunking and vindicatory genealogies.

Embracing the normativity of problematizing and rationalizing genealogies raises a number of questions. I will examine just two here. First: *what* do problematizing and rationalizing genealogies respectively undermine and legitimate?[30] This question is more puzzling than it may at first appear. It might be thought that problematizing genealogy, for one, undermines the rational warrant or justificatory status of our background frameworks in the same way that debunking genealogy undermines the justificatory status of our beliefs, the aim in both cases being to prompt us to revise them. The problem is that, as we've seen, it does not quite make sense to think of our background frameworks as requiring justification at all. Indeed, it is our background frameworks which constitute the very considerations which structure what we count as justification for what, the point at which a justification is considered sufficient, the

kinds of discursive activity which stand in need of justification, and so on. We thus cannot transpose the form of critique found in debunking genealogy into the present context by simply directing it toward our background frameworks.

If problematizing genealogy does not undermine the justificatory status of our background frameworks, then what does it undermine? As previously indicated, problematizing genealogy aims to tear us away from the "sureness" of a language game. What does this mean? Just as Foucault argues that our background frameworks cloak themselves in the guise of necessity to better maintain the systems of power of which they are a part, Tiisala (2017) and Säynäjoki and Tiisala (2023) argue that problematizing genealogy destabilizes the "obviousness" that background frameworks suffuse into select aspects of our discursive activity. By showing that our ways of going on are not as natural or unproblematic as they might appear—that they are the results of questionable, often arbitrary historical forces which could easily have been otherwise—problematizing genealogy enables us to delimit a space for critical reflection on the ostensibly given bases of our linguistic activity so that we can interrogate whether or not they accord with purposes we endorse. Problematizing genealogy should thus be understood to undermine the perceived fixity of our background frameworks, the aura of inevitability in which they are so often cloaked.

An analogous issue arises in relation to rationalizing genealogy. While vindicatory genealogy legitimates our beliefs by outfitting us with additional reasons with which to justify them, background frameworks are, as above, not subject to norms of justification. Rather, rationalizing genealogy enables us to retrospectively imbue the regularities we identify in a concept's history of use with rational significance by imposing an ordering schema on the uses we select for incorporation which makes explicit their common content. This means that whereas vindicatory genealogy legitimates our beliefs, rationalizing genealogy legitimates the very conceptual apparatuses in whose terms our beliefs are formulated.

The second question to be examined is this: what distinguishes debunking from problematizing genealogy, on the one hand, and vindicatory from rationalizing genealogy, on the other, if it turns out that they are all normative? That is, how do we differentiate, say, debunking from problematizing genealogy if, as I contend, they are both straightforwardly undermining? For this, we can turn our attention to their respective *objects* of analysis. As we have seen, debunking and vindicatory genealogies examine the rational status of particular beliefs. By contrast, problematizing and rationalizing genealogy examine the background frameworks in which it becomes possible to think of some content as a believable liable to norms of rationality.[31] The distinction is hence between those genealogies which investigate doxastic atoms and those which investigate the background structures through which they are rendered intelligible. This second dimension of analysis, when added to the existing normative dimension taken from the bipartite and tripartite typologies, thus yields a *two-dimensional* typology (Figure 3).

There are two main advantages of the two-dimensional typology I propose. First, we need no longer puzzle over the issues associated with invoking a tenuous notion of normative neutrality (such as whether problematizing genealogy is subject to the self-defeat objection). By eliminating normative neutrality as a problem requiring a response, we can thus get a better understanding of the literature. And second, the second dimension of analysis enables us to distinguish between genealogies on the basis of the kinds of objects they investigate, not just their normative

	Undermining	Legitimating
Doxastic	Debunking genealogy	Vindicatory genealogy
Background	Problematizing genealogy	Rationalizing genealogy

FIGURE 3 The Two-Dimensional Typology.

objectives. Indeed, it is precisely because the significance of their distinct objects of investigation has been overlooked that quite different genealogies have been grouped together according to the bipartite and tripartite typologies' single (and insufficiently rich) axis of analysis. The distinction between debunking and problematizing genealogies, for instance, turns out not to hinge on their respective normative statuses, but on the fact that the former is concerned with questions about the rational status of our beliefs while the latter is concerned with the structure of the background frameworks through which those beliefs are presented as objects of philosophical concern. Introducing a second dimension of analysis to our typology can thus help us to better articulate what is characteristic of each of the kinds of genealogy introduced, their relationships to one another, and the problems they face.

An objection which might be raised at this point is that, as Wittgenstein notes, "there is not a sharp division" between the elements of a background framework and the framework itself since "the same proposition may get treated at one time as something to test by experience, at another as a rule of testing" (*OC* §§97–98).[32] Although my view of background frameworks is permissive, this may pose a problem for my proposed typology for if there is no difference between the objects investigated by debunking and vindicatory genealogies, on the one hand, and problematizing and rationalizing genealogies, on the other, then it is not clear what work the newly introduced second dimension of analysis is supposed to do. Worse yet, it may collapse the distinction entirely.

Wittgenstein's observation is, I think, basically correct. As Quine notes, what we take to be the fixed points in reference to which the contents of our webs of belief are assessed require inferential connections to other nodes in the web if they are to function as reasons governing its overall behavior, connections that adaptively configure and reconfigure—sometimes radically so—in light of the new nodes added to the web through experience and our involvement in the world (Quine, 1951). For Quine, it is the density of a node's connections which determines its stability, not some function of its semantic content and logical structure. What counts as framework and what as content is hence a function of the structure of the former and the role the latter plays within it. Yet, as Wittgenstein himself notes, we can nevertheless "distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed [of thought] and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other" (*OC* §97) because fixing something "as reliable once for all" is but "a decision for a practical purpose" (*OC* §§48–49). Given that the purpose of presenting a typology is not to engage in exhaustive conceptual analysis but to pursue hermeneutical expediency, this means that while there may indeed be no hard and fast distinction between doxa and background, we are nevertheless entitled to draw a general distinction between the two in light of our present argumentative purposes, viz. composing a navigational aid, not conducting conceptual analysis.

9 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that the two existing ways of organizing the literature on genealogy, the bipartite and tripartite typologies, suffer from confusions which have impeded the development of an accurate understanding of genealogy, the challenges it faces, and its critical potential. This is because the characteristics that both the bipartite and tripartite typologies make available for ascription are limited by the paucity of their respective conceptual maps. Those characteristics have consequently been projected to a false level of generality with the normative purposes and objects of concern typical of some genealogies mistakenly attributed to others. This has led to the widespread acceptance of what I have called the debunking/problematizing and problematizing/rationalizing conflations.

The addition of a second dimension of analysis enriches the conceptual vocabulary at our disposal with which to navigate the literature and understand the various genealogies which populate it. The two-dimensional conceptual map I propose is thus better able to account for the diversity of extant genealogies, to foreground the distinctive argumentative purposes they pursue, and to suggest ways of overcoming the objections they face.[33] We can now see, for instance, that while debunking and vindicatory genealogies can circumvent the genetic fallacy objection, it simply does not apply to problematizing or rationalizing genealogies. Similarly, while debunking genealogy is indeed

self-defeating, problematizing genealogy is able to ambivalently resist the force of the self-defeat objection by problematizing the very presuppositions on which it rests.

It should be noted at this point that I have not introduced any new categories of genealogy: debunking, vindicatory, problematizing, and rationalizing genealogies have all been previously theorized, albeit with varying levels of philosophical attention and under different names. This paper instead aims to simply present a better way of *organizing* things so as to glean a richer understanding of both the genealogies themselves and the relationships they bear to one another. With a map of the literature to guide us, we need no longer run in circles around issues which have long occupied the literature such as problematizing genealogy's normative status.

One such issue is how genealogy fits into the broader debate about the normative foundations of critical theory. Introducing a second dimension of analysis enables us to identify two conceptions of critique stemming from a common Kantian root. On the one hand stands an account of critique derived from the Enlightenment identification of truth and freedom. According to this account, the objective of critique is to dispel the fogs of dogma and superstition so that the light of truth may guide us to emancipatory self-realization as rational beings, to a perspective from which we might, as Yeats so yearned, "hold in a single thought reality and justice" (Yeats, 1937, p. 25).[34] Both debunking and problematizing genealogies are self-defeating on this conception since the commitments on which the genealogist's own truth claims depend are liable to the same undermining argument as the object of critique. But there is another form of critique discernible in Foucault's later work and taken up by Allen (2008), Koopman (2013), Lorenzini (2020, 2023), and Lorenzini and Tazzioli (2020). Rather than freeing ourselves from the shackles of dogma, this conception of critique expresses a critical demand to rework who we are as free agents subject to the demands of truth. This form of critique, as Foucault puts it, uncovers and explicates the "games of truth" which govern "the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognises himself [sic] *qua* subject" (Foucault, 1984c, p. 6). By reflecting these two conceptions of critique in our typology, we outfit ourselves with the tools to both bring reality and justice into closer alignment and to pursue revolutionary self-transformation, the former of which, although vital, is often taken to be the only game in town. Where such an expansion of the notion of critique leads is precisely the work of experimentation left purposefully, if aporetically, undefined.

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ENDNOTES

[1] See Wittgenstein, 2009.

[2] Debunking genealogies are also sometimes referred to as *subversive genealogies* (Craig, 2007; Shklar, 1972). Confusingly, what I call problematizing genealogies below are also sometimes called subversive genealogies. The extent to which this use of nomenclature is a result or cause of the conflations pervading the literature is an issue I shall set aside.

[3] See Xenophanes, 1995.

[4] It's worth noting that these conflations are not unique to the recent literature on genealogy. Jürgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser are, I think, guilty of conflating debunking and problematizing genealogies in their critiques of Foucault, the result being that they both misunderstand the nature of his genealogies and his broader critical project (Fraser, 1985, 1989; Habermas, 1986, 1987).

[5] Seyla Benhabib goes one step further by claiming that this dual-perspectival structure is the key characteristic that distinguishes critical theory writ large from all other theoretico-normative enterprises (Benhabib, 1986).

[6] Craig also outlines a two-dimensional typology in which some genealogies are *explanatory*—insofar as they "account[...] for the existence of whatever it is they vindicate or subvert"—while others are not (Craig, 2007, p. 182). The issue with his proposal is that *all* genealogies seem to me to explain their objects of investigation to some degree; indeed, it is precisely their explanatory force that serves as the fulcrum upon which their philosophical significance hinges and which distinguishes them from mere historical speculation.

[7] This argument depends, of course, on the truth of moral realism for its force (Street, 2006), but the point it makes explicit about the reliability of our moral faculties should nonetheless be clear.

[8] Ideology conceived as false consciousness should not be confused with ideology conceived as hegemony, the latter of which bears a much greater similarity to problematizing genealogy due to its attention to the influence ideology exerts over the standards of assessment against which our beliefs about society are judged (Gramsci, 1971).

[9] Similarly, Sigmund Freud contends that our beliefs about ourselves are the result of a causal process beginning in childhood and culminating in the resolution of the Family Romance which, through psychological inversions and projects, results in beliefs that are false as a necessary condition on maintaining the integrity of the ego in the face of childhood trauma (Freud, 1959).

[10] It's worth noting that an appropriately modified version of this strategy is not available to the vindicatory genealogist since vindicatory genealogies rely on counterfactual, imaginary histories, meaning that there is no causal process in which to ground itself *ex hypothesi*. Vindicatory genealogies thus only deal in questions of justification.

[11] Alisdair MacIntyre also formulates what he calls a distinctively "metaphysical" form of genealogical self-defeat on the basis of the assumed relationship between speaker and audience (MacIntyre, 1990, pp. 45–46). I have not included discussion of it here because it is not clear to me how distinct it is from the normative account of self-defeat outlined by Habermas and Fraser since both accounts purchase their argumentative leverage in reference to the standards of assessment against which a genealogy is to be evaluated. Robert Brandom also introduces a novel account of semantic self-defeat which we shall examine in Section 6.

[12] See also Street (2006), Kahane (2011), Rini (2016), and Sauer (2018).

[13] See also Fraser (1983) and Fraser (1985).

[14] It is precisely this Nietzschean insight which compels Freud to examine the positive value that self-delusion and the repression of traumatic truths can yield in the constitution of a coherent psyche (Butler, 2006, pp. 98–99; Honneth, 2004, p. 355; Leiter, 2004).

[15] See Nietzsche, 1997, 2001.

[16] See Wittgenstein, 1969.

[17] Stalnaker (1970, 1999, 2002), Fricker (2007), Gramsci (1971), Searle (1983), and Bourdieu (1977), to name just a few, present accounts of the assumed background propositions, concepts, institutions, capacities, and practices respectively which enable intelligible communication and constitute our sense of reality.

[18] See also *OC* §§207–210.

[19] See also Butler (2002), Hanssen (2004), Allen (2008), Koopman (2013), Brady (2020), and Sheehey (2020).

[20] Where Kant and Habermas (among others) see eternal, a priori conditions of discursivity, Nietzsche and Foucault only see historical ones. While I'm agnostic toward the question of whether *all* conditions of discourse are historically constituted, there is undoubtedly valuable philosophical work to be done in assessing *which* forms of discursivity might be said to be eternally applicable and which historically variable.

[21] See also Rorty (1989, p. 18).

[22] Building on Allen's and Koopman's work, Sheehey (2020) also illuminatingly theorizes the notion of problematization.

[23] See also Tiisala (2017, pp. 14–16).

[24] See also Bourdieu (1991, pp. 163–164). One potential exception to this rule is under fascist regimes in which the public display of power for power's sake is not only permissible but extolled.

[25] Necessity's pragmatic effect on our discursive activity and the function it performs in perpetuating certain forms of social injustice is precisely why instances of ideology typically manifest as the false representation of some state of affairs as natural or necessary (Stanley, 2015; Young, 1990, p. 74).

[26] See also Foucault's remark in the Introduction to *The History of Sexuality, Vol. II*: "But, then, what is philosophy today—philosophical activity, I mean—if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself. In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?" (Foucault, 1984c, pp. 8–9).

[27] See also Brandom (2012).

[28] See also Lewis (2002, pp. 176–177).

[29] Queloz's account of pragmatic genealogy can itself be seen as an instance of rational reconstruction since a significant component of his project is to argue that pragmatic genealogy constitutes a distinct genealogical tradition which has until now not been made explicit.

[30] This question was brought to my attention through the generous comments of an anonymous reviewer for which I am very grateful.

[31] We might think of this distinction as akin to Davidson's distinction between meaning-change and language-change (Davidson, 1973).

[32] See also Davidson (1973).

[33] An additional benefit of my two-dimensional typology is that it potentially provides a very general framework for thinking about the argumentative purposes of a broad range of philosophical enterprises. Whereas some attempt to make a move within a particular language game, others attempt to redefine the conceptual frameworks that define them. And whereas some attempt to undermine a commitment or practice we already hold, others attempt to enhance our confidence in either an enterprise we already engage in or one we have yet to undertake. Conceptual engineering, for instance, bears striking similarities to possibilizing genealogy while lacking an explicitly theorized historical dimension (Nado, 2021; cf. Queloz, 2021, 2022). Similarly, Gramsci's concept of hegemony targets the very same background assumptions as problematizing genealogy while remaining tied to a narrowly materialist theory of history (Althusser, 2014; Geuss, 1981; Gramsci, 1971; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). It might even be suggested that Thomas Kuhn's and Paul Feyerabend's historicized accounts of scientific practice could be analyzed in light of their similarities to both problematizing and possibilizing genealogies (Feyerabend, 2010; Kuhn, 1996).

[34] See also Rorty (1999, p. 7), cf. Habermas (2000, p. 31).

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