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Response Essay 10 – Reading: Genealogy: A Conceptual Map

“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). 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… 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… 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.” (Ratcliffe 17).

Here, Ratcliffe, noting Wittgenstein, describes a potential objection to his proposed typology. He says the distinction between background frameworks and the beliefs in the foreground can be blurred. He further says, if this is the case, what point does the doxastic-background dimension of analysis serve if it does not disappear entirely. He then says that this objection has a lot of merit, as the nature of frameworks and content being determined by the purpose the latter serves within the former entails a fluidity which dims the distinction, as a belief could at one time be a part of a framework and another time be a content. Despite all of this, Ratcliffe defends the distinction by saying it is useful as a guide through the material and was not born out of the purpose of performing exhaustive conceptual analysis.

If beliefs can transition from background to foreground and vice-versa, do the conclusions in one setting carry over to the “equivalent” in the other setting? For instance, can a problematizing genealogy also serve as a debunking genealogy if the beliefs which make up the background framework are brought to the foreground? By showing that the background framework is historically contingent, thereby undermining its justification, does that mean the beliefs which make up the background when brought to the foreground are still undermined? Does the same apply for the other three variations of the transition across the doxastic background genealogical distinction line? If the distinguishing genealogical line between doxa and background can be blurred, likewise, can the distinction between undermining and legitimating genealogies ever be blurred? Concepts relate to other concepts, and if a genealogy legitimating one concept informs the genealogy’s telling to undermine another concept, then would the genealogy be both legitimating and undermining? This may be an instance of introducing unnecessary complexity, but I think there may be instances where certain concepts can only be understood when taken together. And in these instances, there is the possibility of one concept being undermined while the other is legitimated in a genealogical telling.