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Response Essay 4 – Reading: The Practical Origins of Ideas

“[Pragmatic genealogy] has been considered either entirely redundant or severely restricted in its scope and power. Those who take pragmatic genealogy to be redundant think that if we want to get at the function of our present practices, a synchronic approach is the shortest route, and genealogical state-of-nature fictions can add nothing but colour to these ascriptions of functionality; and if we are interested not in our present practices, but in some earlier historical form they took, we should do real documentary history instead of contenting ourselves with simplistic and fanciful just-so stories—there is plenty of careful contemporary history that is in the business of uncovering functions. Of course, there are also those who have discerned more merit in the method. But even these more sympathetic interpreters see pragmatic genealogy as restricted in several respects: the state of nature’s claim to being explanatory might be salvaged by interpreting it as an abstract depiction of extremely general facts about the human condition, but this restricts the method’s scope of application to the explanation of anthropological universals; it also restricts the method’s freedom in depicting the state of nature, for when it strays too far from reality, the state of nature loses its explanatory value” (Queloz 11).

Earlier, Queloz says pragmatic genealogy “consists in telling partly fictional, partly historical narratives exploring what might have driven us to develop certain ideas in order to discover what these ideas do for us” (Queloz 2). Here, Queloz is detailing two views that are critical of pragmatic genealogy. The first view is that pragmatic genealogy is repetitive in that it illustrates scenarios which are already embodied at various times in history and therefore adds nothing when both are shared. This first view believes that if both depictions achieve similar ends, then the one which draws upon real historical sources is preferred. The second view believes that the purpose of the fictionalized part of pragmatic genealogy is to establish a through line which summarizes very common aspects of human behavior and existence; however, it is forever constrained to this area and can’t go beyond realm of human constants. This entails that the state of nature is also curtailed in what it can illustrate and loses explanatory power when it does not reflect reality.

While reading this passage, several questions crossed my mind as I was trying to consider the merits and potential problems of pragmatic genealogy and arguments which rely upon it as a method. For the philosophers Queloz lists earlier who made arguments using pragmatic genealogy, how crucial is the use of pragmatic genealogy to their arguments? Would all of them still be able to argue their positions effectively without the use of pragmatic genealogy by instead using some alternative method? And if their position can be defended just as effectively without pragmatic genealogy, then why rely on pragmatic genealogy as a method? Or does pragmatic genealogy supply some sort of unique insight that exclusively historical narratives or exclusively fictional narratives cannot make? If they cannot defend their positions without the use of pragmatic genealogy, is that indicative at all of the validity of their arguments? How can we be sure that pragmatic genealogical-based arguments are sound methods of argumentation, especially when that method is all that is relied upon in one’s argument? I will be looking for answers to these questions as I continue to read through the rest of Queloz’s work.