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Response Essay 5 – Reading: The Practical Origins of Ideas

“The idiom of core and periphery or historical variation can be misleading in that regard, as it encourages thinking of the evolution of our conceptual practices on the model of a snowball: as the original core practice rolls down the slopes of history, it accumulates additional layers, but the core is still there by the time it ends up at our feet. This is an improvement on the ‘English genealogists’ that Nietzsche rebukes for simply equating the current function of our practices with their original function. But we can take the injunction to think historically about functions a step further. Just as a snowball may encounter an obstacle that leads it to break up into pieces rolling down different paths and growing into different new shapes, a practice may differentiate into a family of related practices in response to a differentiation in the needs of concept-users. Between them, the practices may still jointly discharge the original function; but there may now be nothing that deserves being called the ‘core’” (Queloz 65).

Here, Queloz explains how a snowball breaking into pieces and then each of those continuing to evolve over time can be an analogy for how a practice or concept can split into new related forms of the original practice or concept. He says that this can happen when the needs of the concept-users change to where a splitting and divergence of the original needs happen. The resulting set of new practices can be combined to serve the purpose the initial practice served. Despite the union of the new practices fulfilling the purpose of the original practice, Queloz says that it may then be the case that there no single, distinguishable thing to be called the ‘core’ of the group of practices.

If a practice does split into multiple related forms like Queloz describes, is it clear that the new practices can always be recognized to be related to one another? In some cases, couldn’t the change the practices undergo after the split be so extensive to where the relationship between each other or them and the original practice becomes less pronounced to where there is no longer any resemblance? In these cases, it seems that this would be more difficult to accurately trace the lineage of these practices back to their origin. What one could possibly do to identify families of practices which are derived from a specific practice and if there is an identifiable core is check if combinations of practices jointly satisfy the same purpose as other practices. This process would likely be a more time-consuming process, especially when there is a lack of similarity to make informed guesses; and potentially fruitless as you may be looking for a nonexistent combination of practices which together cover another practice, or that combination may exist, but there is still no identifiable core in the combination. What is lost if no core can be identified either because it doesn’t exist or it is difficult to see? Is it problematic if no common resemblance can be recognized between the new set of practices? In this event, Queloz does say that, “all is not lost for the reverse-engineering project” (Queloz 65). But if something is lost from this, what exactly would it be?