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Response Essay 9 – Reading: The Practical Origins of Ideas

“It would be a mistake to conclude that we should always try to de-idealize our pragmatic genealogical model as far as possible. This would be to surrender part of the point of telling a genealogy in the first place; quite certainly, it would be to surrender part of the point of Fricker’s genealogy, for it is essential to Fricker’s purpose in telling her genealogy that the model be as generic and idealized as possible… Her declared aim is to ‘reveal how far the virtue of testimonial justice is a fundamental epistemic virtue—that is, an epistemic virtue serving a purpose which transcends history in that it arises out of an epistemic need that is present in any human society’ (2007, 108)… Given this aim, it is clear that we should de-idealize as much as we need to, but as little as we can. For it is in virtue of its abstraction from our concrete situation that the state of nature can lay claim to representing not just a predicament we happen to face given the particulars of our current situation, but one we are bound to face given some of the most general features of the human situation” (Queloz 198-199).

Here, Queloz is discussing the correct balance to reach between idealizing and de-idealizing a pragmatic genealogy. According to him, because part of the reason for telling a genealogy is to utilize the generic and idealized nature of the model, it would be a mistake to de-idealize the pragmatic genealogy as much as one can. This is evident in Fricker’s genealogy, as its purpose is to show that testimonial justice is an epistemic virtue which is universal because it addresses epistemic challenges inherent to any society of people. The abstraction of a more idealized model enables it to encompass a wider range of problems we might face given the fundamental aspects of the human condition.

Queloz is talking here about balancing a pragmatic genealogy for the correct amount of abstraction, but he is not discussing the potential ways to determine if the correct balance has been reached other than if genealogy’s efficacy in fulfilling its purpose is no longer achieved. This raises the question: What other indicators are there that one has gone too far in idealizing or de-idealizing their genealogical model? In situations where it is difficult to determine if the genealogy’s purpose is being fulfilled, it could be helpful to be aware of any indicators which point to whether the genealogy’s current level of abstraction is problematic or not. Obviously, the correct balance should vary based on the particulars of the genealogy and the goal it is supposed to achieve. Are there instances where it is preferable to de-idealize the genealogy as much as warranted rather than “as much as we need to, but as little as we can”? Nietzsche’s genealogy is highly de-idealized, yet it was still able to depict a rich view of the general human condition and fulfill the purpose Nietzsche intended. Are there aspects of genealogies like the one Nietzsche gave that Queloz is overlooking?