Genealogy as Immanent Critique: Working from the Inside


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– only as persons of this conscience do we still feel ourselves related to the German rectitude and piety of millennia, even if as its most questionable and final descendents, we immoralists, we godless ones of today, indeed even in a certain sense as its heirs, as the executors of its innermost will …

(Nietzsche, Daybreak, Preface §4)

1. Introduction

Of the distinctive terminology of nineteenth-century thought, perhaps no word has been more widely adopted than ‘genealogy’. ‘Genealogy’, of course, had a long history before Nietzsche put it in the title of a book, but the original sense of pedigree or family tree is not the one that has become so prominent in contemporary academic discourse. Nietzsche initiated a new sense of ‘genealogy’ that, oddly, has become popular despite a lack of clarity about what it is. My aim here is to clarify this sense of genealogy by situating it in the context of nineteenth-century narrative argument and identifying its general features. I contend that the famous Nietzschean
genealogy is actually the least distinctive narrative form; its features are to be found, usually
together, in others’ argumentation. This is by no means to disparage Nietzsche, but the
contemporary prominence of genealogy comes not from Nietzsche offering the most extreme or
radical account, but from offering the one that most neatly represents the critical, historical
consciousness of the nineteenth century.⁴

Genealogy, as with other prominent philosophical-historical accounts, involves narratives
that, by relating the functioning of a process, explain some feature of the present. The presence
of the past is thus implicit in such accounts: with certain phenomena, understanding them
requires seeing not only their immediate condition, but also their extension backward through
time. There are, I contend, four features that both distinguish genealogy as such and establish its
common ground with other prominent accounts. First, genealogy involves what I call historical
agency. The events narrated in a genealogy are considered as, if only in an inchoate or
unconscious way, actions. Genealogy thus explains human events by appeal to terms familiar
from the domain of human agency: purposes, reasons, and above all freedom. Second, genealogy
involves a form of cosmopolitanism. There are many forms of cosmopolitanism, and that of
genealogy is not a typical one, such as one in which ethnic or national differences are ethically
insignificant. The cosmopolitanism of genealogy, rather, is that human identity is collective and
in particular historical: being oneself involves relations to a broader community. Indeed,
genealogy typically characterizes identity, in its increasingly particularized form in the modern
world, as coordinate with membership in increasingly broader groups, such that some identities
are only possible as the legacy of enormous historical projects. Third, genealogy is typically
critical. Genealogy, that is, takes normative (or, for that matter, social) authority to be
problematic, and responds to this by showing that certain clams to authority are in some way
defective. As Nietzsche characterized it, genealogy is a ‘no-saying’\textsuperscript{5} enterprise, whose purpose is to exhibit the failure of ideals. Fourth, genealogy is \textit{historical-hermeneutic}. Genealogy does not merely provide accounts of a sequence of events or of the changing circumstances of stable entities. Genealogy provides accounts of things that are themselves historical: because they are so fluid or indefinable, they can only be accounted for within the temporal scope of the narrative.

Together these features render genealogy into what might be called ‘immanent critique’.\textsuperscript{6} By this I mean that it offers a kind of critique that does not involve the adoption of a privileged position with respect to the object of critique. One might conceive of a typical critique in terms of a superior standpoint: the critic or the criticism has some kind of epistemic privilege or better reasons or more information, and is thus well-placed to pass judgment on something. In an immanent critique, by contrast, no such privileged standpoint is available, either because there are reasons to doubt any such claim of privilege, or because the legitimacy of one’s standpoint is itself part of what the critique addresses. Immanent critique thus proceeds by taking up the very position or standpoint to be criticized and identifying ‘internal’ flaws: ones that count as such from within the standpoint under consideration. In accordance with the basic features of genealogy, particular claims are inseparable from the more general commitments that shape an outlook. Advancing these commitments turns out to be self-undermining in a way that produces a transformative result. This provides the critical conclusion: the transformation is explicable as an immanent failure of the old position. The critical conclusion is thus always at least potentially vindicating: the result is a claim of relative superiority, if only that almost anything would be better than the old position.

Here my procedure will be to examine genealogy as a general approach by considering the main exemplars of philosophical-historical argumentation of the nineteenth century, along
with some precursors and heirs. Unfortunately I have to neglect some worthy possibilities, but I hope to cover a full range of variations on genealogy. I shall not be concerned with presenting the content of the particular stories that these philosophers tell: the particular personae, events, and dynamics are less important for present purposes than the ways in which their narratives function as arguments. Indeed, one thing I hope to show is that, apart from the distraction of differences on particular substantive issues, there is a commonality in the way these philosophers regard the relationship between historical self-understanding and normative critique.

2. Nietzsche’s Example: Genealogy

I will not try here to present an uncontroversial view of Nietzsche’s genealogy: since there is no such thing, the attempt would be in vain. In this section, my aim is instead to bring out some main features of Nietzsche’s approach, in order to show how genealogy operates as immanent critique. I hope that showing how these features function together does illuminate Nietzsche’s philosophical position in general: the elements of my reading should be mutually reinforcing. But resolving interpretative issues is less important for present purposes than locating, in Nietzsche’s work, a critical, historical, cosmopolitan account of normative, and in particular, ethical authority.

One might think that there is a relatively clear path for ascertaining what Nietzschean genealogy consists in. One should simply turn to Nietzsche himself for a statement of method, or at least a definition of the term ‘genealogy’, or failing that to identify the key elements or commonalities among the paradigm cases. But apart from referring to the title of his own 1887 work, *On the Genealogy of Morals (Zur Genealogie der Moral)*, Nietzsche hardly ever uses the word ‘genealogy’, let alone identifies a method that is supposed to be distinct from historical
method in general. Even locating the titular ‘genealogy of morals’ is a challenge. The promise of a single, complete account of morals is undercut by the preposition that begins the title, ‘on’ or possibly ‘to’ (zu), and by the three narratives with a chronologically and otherwise indeterminate relationship to one another that comprise the book.

We can nevertheless identify enough of Nietzsche’s genealogical account to be able to isolate its main features. In the Preface of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche declares that his true concern in offering genealogical hypotheses has been to provide a ‘critique of moral values’ (Nietzsche [1887] 1967–77c: 253/P6). He suggests that we lack self-knowledge in part because ‘our moral prejudices’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 248/P2) have gone unexamined: what we are is so thoroughly bound up with moral values that narratives of self-understanding must take the form of critique. Three sets of narratives that manage to be both polemical and ambiguous then follow: they offer unflattering reports of successes that have turned out to be destructive. In the first Treatise, the main subject is the invention of the good/evil dichotomy. Nietzsche claims that the spontaneous self-affirmation of nobles was replaced by the ‘slave revolt in morality’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 270/I.10), wherein the weak exacted ‘imaginary revenge’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 271/I.10) against the nobles by inverting their value system. The weak refer to the noble and powerful as ‘evil,’ and themselves, by contrast, as ‘good,’ and meekness and humility comprise this new form of goodness. Nietzsche later refers to slave morality – or simply ‘morality’ – as undoubtedly victorious, but at the same time as a form of ‘anti-nature’ that succeeds at the cost of health. The second Treatise primarily concerns what Nietzsche calls ‘the fundamental moral concept’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 297/II.4), namely guilt. According to Nietzsche, the notion of guilt has its origin in the non-moral notions of debt and indebtedness. The creditor-debtor relationship was the forum in which human beings first measured themselves
against one another, and, when creditors suffered losses, they made the debtors suffer as
compensation. This gave rise to pre-moral notions of guilt and duty which, when ‘turned
backwards’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 331/II.21) into the ‘bad conscience’, made a final discharge of
the creditor-debtor relationship impossible. This, claims Nietzsche, has produced memory, the
inwardization of humankind, and also the ‘the self-crucifixion and self-violation of the human’
(Nietzsche 1967–77c: 333/II.23). The third and final Treatise explains how the priest, in teaching
the sufferers that they are to blame for their suffering, ‘changes the direction of ressentiment’
(Nietzsche 1967–77c: 375/III.15) and invents ‘the ascetic ideal’. The ascetic ideal functions as an
expedient that comforts the sick by providing an explanation for suffering, but at the same time
exacerbates their sickness. Nietzsche suggests in concluding the narrative that ‘all will to truth’
(Nietzsche 1967–77c: 410/III.27) has put itself forward as a candidate to replace the ascetic
ideal, but turns out to be the ideal’s especially pure form.

Even this skeletal account of Nietzsche’s approach in one text evinces the four main
features of genealogy. *Historical agency* makes its appearance above all in the form of the
ascetic ideal. Nietzsche characterizes human history as the working out of an ideal in particular
manifestations: Christian morality and the will to truth, for example, thereby take on causal roles.
By way of the specific appeal to asceticism, moreover, Nietzsche insists that we cannot
understand our historical condition except as something we have done to ourselves. Nietzsche’s
account involves appeals to a common agency that extends across millennia: ‘We moderns, we
are the heirs of the conscience-vivisection and animal-self-cruelty of millennia: this is our
longest practice, our artistry perhaps, or in any case our refinement, our discriminating palate’
(Nietzsche 1967–77c: 335/II.24; cf. 410/III.27). This very feature also shows the
*cosmopolitanism* of Nietzsche’s account. Nietzsche characterizes human history as one slowly
developing action – indeed, as a kind of meta-action, that of furnishing a meaningful end for the will through an intensifying asceticism. The result of this project is that a common human identity outweighs all the particular forms that contributed to it. The critical element of genealogy is obvious: in addition to the declared intention to offer a critique of moral values, there is the conclusion that modernity represents a self-enervating will to nothingness.

The historical-hermeneutic aspect of genealogy comes out more strongly in Nietzsche’s statements on ‘historical methodology’ than in the above summary: for example, in his famous claim that ‘only that which has no history is definable’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 317II.13). Nietzsche connects this methodological claim both to the features of the narrative and to the other features of genealogy, however. The context of the claim about history is a claim about the primacy of the ‘fundamental concept’ of activity over ‘the mechanistic senselessness of all happening’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 315/II.12). Undefinability, that is, comes from understanding events as actions; this is what also generates the availability of critique. Nietzsche declares this to be the most important proposition of historical method:

The cause of the origin of a thing and its final utility, actual employment, and place in a system of purposes lie worlds apart; that something existing, having somehow come-into-being, is always again and again appropriated by a power superior to it and interpreted from new viewpoints, reorganized and redirected toward a new use; that everything that happens in the organic is an overcoming, a becoming master, and on the other hand that all overcoming and becoming master is a new-interpreting, a preparation in which the prior ‘meaning’ and ‘purpose’ must necessarily be obscured or entirely obliterated. (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 313f/II.12)

This continual reappropriation of purposes is what allows Nietzsche to claim that our modern commitments to institutions have a meaning fundamentally different from the one that they are supposed to have. And history as self-subverting activity not only brings light to failures in human agency; it also connects the opacity of the ‘continuous sign-chain of new interpretations’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 314/II.12) with the cosmopolitan nature of the ‘actual problem of the
human’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 291/II.1). A genealogical approach is necessary, Nietzsche suggests, because we lack privileged access to our own meanings and must therefore locate them in the history of the human more generally.

These features of genealogy suffice to distinguish it from a Humean account, or what Nietzsche referred to as that of the ‘English psychologists’. Such an account is primarily explanatory. It attempts to identify the basic psychological features of human nature, along with the principles of association or causal regularities that are sufficient to explain the emergence of familiar ethical dispositions. The aim is to show that and how complex systems of value could develop out of simple elements of our psychology. This kind of account shares with Nietzsche’s enterprise the view that morality itself has a causal explanation, and thus requires an account of historical change in order to understand it. Even the meaning of this narrow commonality would be in dispute, however. For Nietzsche, as we have seen, purposive activity plays a distinctive explanatory role; such activity in a Humean account, by contrast, is indistinguishable from other events determined by antecedent causes. The meaning of historical change is different, too. For Hume, this can only mean that the ‘original constitution’ of human nature manifests itself in different ways, depending on causal history; everything, furthermore, is either definable in empirical terms or meaningless. But for Nietzsche’s genealogy there are no stable entities that endure through history as the subject of change. Historical change, rather, is so pervasive that the basic elements of the narrative – ‘punishment’ is Nietzsche’s most famous example (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 316/II.13) – are fluid and indeterminate. This makes Nietzsche’s form of cosmopolitanism different, too: rather than being rooted in a common human nature, Nietzsche’s version only enters at the end of his story, as a shared ascetic patrimony. The principal aim of genealogy, moreover, is critical rather than explanatory.
Critique is indeed the very point of Nietzsche’s genealogical enterprise. The Humean approach can provide a causal history of moral belief, and thereby perhaps an account of its meaning, but genealogy aims to assess moral beliefs. And such a critique cannot presume epistemic superiority – ‘the value of truth must be experimentally called into question’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 401/III.24), writes Nietzsche – because such a presumption is potentially implicated in the outlook under scrutiny. So genealogy functions as ‘immanent critique’: it provides a critical assessment without appealing to the independent authority of its critical stance. Genealogy criticizes moral values – or more generally, ‘ideals’ – by taking them as not merely furnishing a measure or standard, but also functioning to structure the conduct and understanding of life. And because ideals are purposive in this way, they can be assessed, on their own terms, by their success or failure.

The dynamic of this is complex, at least on Nietzsche’s account, since living in light of an ideal transforms not just one’s life, but also the ideal and oneself. As Nietzsche sees the process, having ideals affects the life that one leads, sometimes in line with the ideals and sometimes perversely. In either case, the resulting transformation of life also changes the self: a new human type is cultivated or ‘bred’, as Nietzsche would have it. This transformation of the self alters the meaning of ideals, which in turn changes the way in which lives are led, and so on. Genealogy’s critical point is that this whole process has conclusively failed: morality represents a purposiveness that cannot possibly be redeemed. There are three different ways in which Nietzsche makes the case for the failed teleology of morality. One, it turns out to have achieved defective purposes: it reduces humanity to ‘the botched, diminished, atrophied, and poisoned’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 277/I.11). Two, morality generates purposes that are opposite from what had been intended: here Nietzsche’s main example is the ‘priestly medication’ of the
interpretation of suffering ‘that makes people sicker’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 391/III.21). Third and most importantly, the purposiveness of morality has come to a dead end, in which all other purposes have been coopted or measured ‘only according to the meaning of its interpretation’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 396/III.23), and yet the possibility of any further purposiveness has been foreclosed. In the concluding section of On the Genealogy of Morals, the ascetic ideal has moved from the ‘faute de mieux par excellence’ to ‘will to nothingness’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 412f/III.28). Nietzsche’s argument qualifies as immanent critique because of his claim that it is precisely from adopting a moral standpoint that we are led to conclude that it has failed: in Nietzsche’s simplest formulation, it is the Christian cultivation of responsibility and ‘will to truth’ that finally turns against itself. What is more, Nietzsche insists that there is no alternative to the ‘One Goal’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 396/III.23) of the ascetic ideal, so we cannot help but draw the conclusion against the moral standpoint.

There remains more to be said about Nietzsche’s genealogical enterprise and the way it functions as immanent critique. The range of possibilities for immanent critique is better exhibited, however, in others’ critical narrative forms; after a consideration of these I shall return to Nietzsche.

3. The Prehistory of Genealogy

One element of the understanding of genealogy would have to be the reflexive one: a genealogy of genealogy. Such a project would be limitless in its complexity. Places of honor could be given to Greek tragic irony, the Judeo-Christian hope for messianic intervention in temporal history, the self-image of the ‘Renaissance’, Giambattista Vico, the higher criticism, teleology in biology and chemistry, Darwin, and much more. Here, however, I wish to merely point out two
significant contributions to the flurry of productivity following the Enlightenment’s invention of the term ‘philosophy of history’ (this is attributed to Voltaire in Lemon 2003: 7). Rousseau and Kant offered philosophies of history that, together, laid much of the groundwork for the development of genealogy.

In the opening words of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau introduces most of the basic preconditions of genealogy: ‘Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains’ (Rousseau [1762] 1966: 41). Here there is the cosmopolitanism of the human condition, the consideration of human beings as freely active, the perverse operation of that activity to self-enslavement, and the iron necessity of historical processes. In the philosophy of history, with Rousseau’s famous claim that we have become corrupt and sick precisely by our own freedom and ‘perfectibility’ (Rousseau [1755] 1992: 184), even deeper affinities with genealogy can be found.

In Rousseau’s critique of the Enlightenment, modern forms of social organization, in seeking to legitimate themselves, have mistaken what unjust institutions have made of ‘men’ for human nature itself. As a result, putatively rational institutions only serve to legitimate and intensify existing forms of domination. Our social order has thereby reached a dead end, in which we have reached the ‘extreme state of corruption’ (Rousseau 1992: 252) and old processes of legitimation no longer function at all. This pattern of argument, despite all of Rousseau’s differences from Nietzsche,⁹ represents a crucial formative step towards genealogy: ironic historical agency. Rousseau’s argument is not that Enlightenment efforts to vindicate a modern social order have failed because of implementation problems, or because the institutions were somehow too good for the world. Rousseau’s argument was that precisely because such institutions succeeded, in proportion to their immense effectiveness, they generated human misery and thus their own delegitimation. Rousseau takes the Enlightenment narrative of
progress and provides a counternarrative in which all the same events occur but every single change has been for the worse. To put this point in its simplest form, ‘The majority of our ills are our own doing’ (Rousseau 1992: 179), and an appropriate critical narrative will therefore tell the story of how we, by our own agency, continuously made things worse, and made things especially bad when we were the most successful.

Rousseau’s other main contribution to the development of genealogy was that he was the first to theorize the speculative enterprise of cosmopolitan self-knowledge that Nietzsche also engaged in. Just as Nietzsche opened his Preface, Rousseau begins the Preface of the Second Discourse by invoking missing self-knowledge: ‘the most useful and least advanced of all the fields of human knowledge seems to me to be that of man’ (Rousseau 1992: 157). In his Introduction, Rousseau further emphasizes the cosmopolitan import of his account. He writes, ‘O man, from whatever land you come, whatever your opinions, listen. Here is your history that I have thought to read, not in the books of your compatriots, who are liars, but in nature, which never lies’ (Rousseau 1992: 169). What is most distinctive about Rousseau’s account is how he conceives of his method, however. This conception of method emerges in two passages:

Let us begin therefore by setting aside all the facts, because they do not touch upon the question. One must not take the investigations that can be carried out on this subject for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasonings, more appropriate for clearing up the nature of things than for showing their true origin … (Rousseau 1992: 169)

Because it is no easy enterprise to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to know well a state that does not exist, that perhaps did not exist, and probably never will exist, and about which it is nevertheless necessary to have correct notions in order to judge our present state. (Rousseau 1992: 158)

In Rousseau’s historical enterprise, the factual is not merely absent, say because of epistemic difficulties with respect to the past. The factual is irrelevant. Because Rousseau’s aim is to identify ‘the nature of things’ rather than the ‘true origin’, ‘hypothetical and conditional
reasonings’ are appropriate. And this is so in spite of Rousseau’s concession in the second passage that there never was nor ever will be a state of nature. Rousseau is not indifferent to the realism of the story and the causal effectiveness of its elements; at the very least, arriving at the ‘correct notions’ is critical. But whereas empirical evidence can only support causal inferences, one can from speculation ‘draw the nature of things’ (Rousseau 1992: 221). In this way, Rousseau moves historical narrative away from contingent happenings toward the normative analysis of the internal character of human agency. As in genealogy, narrative elements function to show something about who we are and what we are doing.

Kant builds on Rousseau’s contributions, in particular, Rousseau’s story of cosmopolitan freedom. What Rousseau formulates in terms of the incommensurable value of human liberty, Kant explains, most famously, in terms of a universal legislative capacity. Rational beings are thus ‘ends-in-themselves’ (Kant [1785] 1994: 51/Ak. 4:429) and a source of unconditional worth. In conceiving of persons in this way, Kant decisively marks a shift in cosmopolitanism, from imagining that there is some significant quality that all human beings possess in common, to granting everyone the same normative status. Kant’s insistence, that is, that all should be entitled to ‘rational esteem for individual value’ (Kant 1999: 21) contributed to genealogy’s interest in the sustainability of ideal commitments.

Kant is worth mentioning in this context because of two additional contributions. The most important is critique. Of course, there was a notion of critique before Kant, and Rousseau was certainly, in some sense, critical of his culture. But Kant makes clear that critique is not simply an epistemological notion, but also a historical-cultural one: in declaring an ‘age of critique’ (Kant [1781/1787] 1956: A xii), he placed critique within the historical dynamic, so that critical adequacy became part of the explanation of events. And just as important was Kant’s
specific conception of critique in terms of self-scrutiny and real possibility. Critique proceeds immanently: a ‘critique of pure reason’ is reason’s critique of itself. In particular, critique proceeds by identifying possibility conditions. For example, Kant claims that the pure concepts of the understanding are necessary for the possibility of experience. His argument does not concern logical possibility: experience without such concepts is not self-contradictory. His argument, rather, is that judgment involving the pure concepts constitutes the possibility of experience and that the concepts are therefore objectively valid. By thus connecting legitimacy with real possibility, Kant makes way for the critical practice of the nineteenth century: that supposed value commitments are somehow unsustainable or unlivable in practice, and must therefore be rejected.

The other main contribution of Kant’s to the development of genealogy was his invocation of the question of hope. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant offered ‘What may I hope?’ (Kant 1956: B832) as one of three questions that express the complete interest of reason; indeed, this is the most important of the questions, since it promises a unified resolution of the other two. What is important about this is not Kant’s specific answer, in terms of the ‘development of humanity’s original capacities’ (Kant 1999: 3), nor even the appeal to hope in general, although this reappears, for example, in Adorno. What is important about the appeal to hope is that it signifies that we make sense of ourselves in narrative terms. Kant posed a question that would eventually be answered in his philosophy of history. By locating our deepest interest in hope and insisting that it would sustain philosophical scrutiny, Kant suggested that we should see ourselves in terms of a narrative that extends indefinitely into the future, so that our commitments and even what we are transcend the present moment.
With Rousseau’s and Kant’s contributions, then, most of the theoretical underpinning of
genealogy is already present at the end of the eighteenth century. History is a field of purposive,
if ironically self-subverting agency; cosmopolitan commitment to the distinctive standing of
persons is in place; and the immanent critique of our own human powers has ascended to cultural
supremacy. But the distinctively historical form of genealogy is still lacking. Even though he
thinks it has been completely effaced, Rousseau still makes appeal to a Humean ‘original
constitution’, if only as a benchmark. Rousseau thinks that there is an independently specifiable
content to what sort of creatures we naturally are, and that this content, even if irretrievably lost,
can help us make sense of ourselves now. Kant more fully abandons the normative significance
of nature, except insofar as its cunning leads us to develop our moral capacities. But for him
reason, even if merely formal, is fully determinate; through a consideration of the form of
legislative capacities, one can derive the content of the moral law and the human vocation.
Original constitution is thus replaced by the ‘original capacities’ of humanity. History, then, can
reveal or conceal what already in some sense is, but shows no discontinuities in its underlying
actors. To arrive at genealogy, then, what so far remains stable must still be historicized: being
must be considered as ‘absolutely mediated’ (Hegel [1807] 1988a: 29/§37) through human
activity, and reason and nature thereby reunited with transformed content. This is Hegel’s task.

4. Hegel: Phenomenology on the via dolorosa

Hegel offers his Jena Phenomenology as, at first encounter, an account of adequately
‘scientific’ cognition: ‘The goal is Spirit’s insight into what knowing is’ (Hegel 1988a: 23/§29).
The initial presentation of this topic is indeed what one might expect. Hegel sets forth ways of
conceiving of the relationship between consciousness and the world, with a view to assessing whether the objects of consciousness might count as knowledge. Even the initial formulation, however, suggests that Hegel’s account will depart from the familiar framework: the goal is Spirit’s insight. The story that Hegel tells turns out not to be one of increasing accuracy in specifying the relationship between two stable things, but one of each side being transformed in a developmental process until Spirit’s ‘certainty of being all reality is raised to truth’ (Hegel 1988a: 288/§438). In the ‘science of the experience that consciousness goes through’ (Hegel 1988a: 28/§36), meeting the demands of knowing turns out to require reconceptualizations in the self-understanding of the subject of experience, and thus turns out to require both self-transformations of the subject and objective experience in the world.

Hegel characterizes the path that consciousness follows as the ‘way of despair’ (Hegel 1988a: 61/§78). The achievement of every new perspective, or ‘shape of consciousness,’ that is, comes at the cost of increasingly deeper, more self-alienating, more conclusive failures. The process does not involve a stable subject who succeeds in making incremental progress toward the realization of some theoretical insight. Instead, movement comes from adopting forms of self-understanding that turn out to collapse completely. The relevant failures generate ‘despair’ and not just abdication: they must be personal in two ways. One is that they provoke a loss of identity. Since some form of self-understanding is always at stake in the relationship to the world, failure on the path to science always appears as the loss of any familiar way of going forward. The other way in which the relevant failures are personal is that they are self-provoked. In a phrase that could have come from Nietzsche, Hegel writes, ‘consciousness suffers this violence … from its own hands’ (Hegel 1988a: 63/§80). The dissatisfaction that leads to collapse is generated internally.
Hegel’s claims about ‘absolute mediation’ and reason ‘knowing itself to be all reality’ are indeed his way of setting out his conclusion that there is nothing outside of our own conceptual activity that sets authoritative standards for us. As he characterizes his phenomenological approach, ‘Consciousness gives its standard to itself, and the investigation will thereby be a comparison of itself with itself’ (Hegel 1988a: 64/§84). Hegel in this way offers a form of immanent critique. The dialectic does not proceed by measuring the stages against some external standard; it proceeds by each shape of consciousness being occupied, as it were, and contradictions arising amid the attempts to carry it out, until the contradictions come to seem unresolvable from within the current standpoint. As Hegel puts this, ‘reason is purposive activity’ (Hegel 1988a: 16/§22). Failures emerge from trying to live out normative self-understandings; as a matter of practice, they generate skepticism about themselves and undermine their own authority. In this way Hegel is the heir of Kant: real possibility takes on a negative form, as the impossibility of avoiding contradiction within the dialectical movement.

The dynamic by which consciousness generates its own skepticism involves the determinacy of conceptual content. Any form of self-understanding will be, as such, conceptually mediated. But the specific mediations that constitute self-understanding only gain determinate content in the context of lived experience. Within lived experience, however, the more determinate meanings turn out to be self-subverting, and require replacement. There is a particularly clear explanation of this point in the *Philosophy of History*. Hegel writes, ‘The logical nature, and moreover the dialectical nature of the concept in general is that it is self-determining: it posits determinations in itself, then negates them, and thereby gains in this negation an affirmative, richer, and more concrete determination’ (Hegel 1988b: 67; cf. Hegel 1988a: 39/§53). In Hegel’s picture, this dynamic is completely general: even Spirit’s recognition
of itself in its freedom requires making its own content available through a long, historical process of failed self-definition.

That the dynamic proceeds in this way conveys a hermeneutic import. Since, on Hegel’s picture, content emerges out of negating activity and there is nothing extra-conceptual that can function as a ground, all meanings are unstable, at the very least until skepticism ‘completes itself’ (Hegel 1988a: 61/§78). Meanings depend on their historical location, relative both to past determination and to the future negations that they will resist. The very shape that Spirit can take depends on historical externalizations of content in this way. As a result, meaning is never available ready-to-hand. It must be traced out across temporal contexts with degrees of complexity that depend on how closely it is involved with Spirit’s self-understanding.

Hegel moves beyond the Enlightenment form of philosophy of history by historicizing all the way down. He recounts a story in which there are discontinuities in the dramatis personae (or persona) and in the processes of change; interpreting these elements thus becomes a matter of locating the context of self-activity rather than re-identifying stable objects. With Hegel, then, all the elements of genealogy are already together: historical agency, cosmopolitanism, critique, and historical hermeneutics. What might make Hegel seem far removed from genealogy is that he thinks not only that this process has a point of completion, as does Marx, but that he thinks that his time has reached this end point. But the substantive details of the narrative do not have much of an effect at the level of genealogical practice. Immanent critique is always potentially, in a qualified way, vindicatory; that Hegel deemed the historical process to be largely successful does not change this approach. For Hegel, too, absolutely everything needs to be submitted to justificatory scrutiny, even the demand for justificatory scrutiny itself. And nothing, it turns out, could possibly count as an answer that lies outside of what I have been calling historical agency.
The main difference in approach lies in Hegel’s attempt to circumvent what might be called the ‘starting point problem’ in immanent critique. Since immanent critique proceeds by showing that flaws are internal to the standpoint under criticism, its critical reach only extends as far as the standpoint within which it works. It can show, that is, that particular positions fail and lead to comparatively better results; but it cannot show that an entirely different trajectory, with an entirely different starting point, might not have led to an even more satisfactory position. Hegel addresses this potential shortcoming with a category theory, or ‘logic’, the burden of which is to show that his narrative is perfectly general: no other starting point could be available. No one else has thought to make such a claim as a matter of logic; but as we shall see with Marx, the strategy of denying that there is any alternative starting point worthy of consideration has endured.

5. Marx: Materialist Dialectics

By illuminating the pervasive effects of economic institutions and the distinctive character of capitalism, Marx has become the most influential genealogist outside of philosophy. At the same time, however, Marx is the most eccentric, in ways that often pass unrecognized. Marx, uniquely among genealogists, claims to offers the genuine causal account of actual historical events, and indeed depends on the accuracy of his account for his argument to succeed. With Marx, any gap between real possibility and justification is closed off: the only issue to be addressed is the sustainability of institutionalized practices, and any question of justification is deferred until some social practice is realized that does not generate its own contradiction. Marx’s version of immanentism, his view of thought as operating internal to its context, accordingly leads him
away from taking evaluative questions seriously until the causal structure of human practices is resolved.

In the *German Ideology*, written in 1845, Marx introduces his historical approach with an account of ‘science’ that was to endure throughout his career: ‘Where speculation ends, where real life starts, there consequently begins positive science, the exhibition of practical activity, of the practical process of development of men’ (Marx and Engels 1976a: 37, modified). Science, which for Hegel was distinguished by the absolute reach of critical scrutiny, is for Marx distinguished by its deferral. ‘Communists,’ furthermore, ‘do not preach morality at all’ (Marx and Engels 1976a: 247). Justificatory and evaluative claims reflect material conditions, so those matters, insofar as they are relevant, must wait for a post-revolutionary consciousness. Accordingly Marx, by appeal to the material, the real, the empirically verifiable, resolved to exhibit the actual historical process and the contradictions that it generates. In the *German Ideology*, Marx thus identifies ‘real individuals, their activity, and the material conditions of their lives’ (Marx and Engels 1976a: 31) as his ‘premises’; his narrative is meant simply to be a chronicle, once the correct ontology and the genuine causal factors are identified.

The conception of history that Marx then offers involves the basic elements needed to explain productive activity, the formation of social relations, and the creation of new needs. With these basic elements in place, the historical process takes on its own dynamic. New generations continually transform their material inheritance to increase productive capacity; this necessitates a change in social institutions to accommodate the new economic relations; this in turn changes the goods that a society requires for itself, which in turn changes the organization of production, and so on. Above all, this process is characterized by greater and greater ‘division of labor’. As productive tasks becomes more and more narrowly circumscribed, economic activity takes on its
own logic, separate from the purposes of any and all participants: ‘This consolidation of what we ourselves produce into a material power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in our historical development up till now’ (Marx and Engels 1976a: 47f). This consolidation, as a chief causal factor, at the same time generates the critical conclusion.

The division of labor is effective at increasing material power, but also consolidating it apart from human agency. This is what, on Marx’s account, generates the contradictions that bring about revolution. Human productive activity alienates its own causal efficacy from itself more and more until it can do so no further; a dynamic internal to the process compels it finally to break down once its self-alienating character is complete. Marx thus is not primarily concerned to offer theoretical claims about reality or an account of the reasons that we might currently have to revolt. Marx is, rather, arguing that we can anticipate the resolution of a general practical problem: social contradictions will bring about their own demise. Although no evaluative standpoint is presently available, we shall be able to gain some purchase on the defects of current institutions after their conclusive failure. We can thus see how, although Marx’s account is causal, it differs from a Humean one. In appealing to the ‘actual relations springing from an existing class struggle’ (Marx and Engels 1976b: 498), Marx invokes the distinctive character of human activity, even when that activity is ironically subverted. For Marx, as with Hegel, the causal process is one of agency that finds itself in self-externalization; the developmental account belongs to the Geisteswissenschaften rather than the Naturwissenschaften. And as with genealogical accounts in general, the aim is critical: to show that current social conditions are indefensible.
The similarities with Hegel at the level of historical approach are noted, in a different respect, in Marx’s 1872 Preface to *Capital*. There Marx, although insisting that Hegel’s approach ‘must be turned right side up again’ (Marx 2000: 458), nevertheless gives him credit for working out the dialectical method in a full and comprehensive manner. Indeed, in defending his own dialectical approach against a mixed review, Marx argues that it is inherently ‘critical and revolutionary’:

> [Dialectic] includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things at the same time also the recognition of the negation of the state, of its inevitable breaking up … it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence … it lets nothing impose upon in, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary. (Marx 2000: 458)

The reason to adopt a dialectical approach is, of course, that doing so serves the revolutionary ends of critique. Marx’s explanation for how it does so, however, appeals to historical-hermeneutic grounds. One cannot employ the appropriate social categories, take note of the shifts in categories, account for the dynamics of change, or recognize the ‘fluid movement’ of all social forms without a dialectical approach.

We can now see that Marx’s way of identifying his differences with Hegel, that Hegel offers a ‘mystical’ rather than ‘rational’ (Marx 2000: 458) form of dialectic that needs to be inverted, is unfair. They share an approach to history that criticizes institutions on the basis of a dialectical logic that exhibits their real possibility. Hegel’s famous formulation of this point, that the rational is the ‘wirklich’ (Hegel [1821] 1995: 24), the actual or effective, could just as well apply to Marx’s analysis of the contradictions of capitalism. Of course, the details of the narratives differ completely, but neither is it fair to claim that for Hegel, ‘the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea”’ (Marx 2000: 457), as if Hegel were not, like Marx, criticizing the picture in which the ideal and the material were ‘self-standingly’ (Marx and
Engels 1976a: 35, modified) independent of one another. Marx radicalizes, among other things, the philosophical tradition of hyperbolic assertion of a break with the past.

In any case, there are significant divergences from Hegel and the others. Although Marx could fairly be called a genealogist of capitalism, his is the most eccentric account. Almost uniquely, he stakes out an anti-speculative account. Whereas Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche want to identify causally-significant features of the world to support their normative claims, Marx wants to identify particular causal interactions in the world. Unlike the others, he attempts to explain historically identifiable events – indeed, the historical process as a whole. There are then three main implications of this anti-speculative approach. One, already mentioned, is that Marx claims to have no evaluative purchase on the world; under present conditions, such judgments must be ideological. Two, Marx insists that historical narrative must follow ‘order in time’ rather than ‘order in the idea’ (Marx and Engels 1986: 44): narrative elements must follow a chronological sequence rather than ‘their logical sequence and their serial relation in the understanding’ (Marx and Engels 1976b: 62). Third, Marx has a different response to the ‘starting point problem’ that Hegel addressed by his logic. For Marx, worrying about whether the actual historical process neglects some better, alternative possibility for human existence is simply a waste of time. Marx writes, ‘The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination’ (Marx and Engels 1976a: 31). A better possibility is purely imaginary, and thus does not merit serious consideration. Marx promises that the real will eventually provide hermeneutic closure to the real possibilities of human social life.

John Stuart Mill is not especially known for his philosophy of history. However, in *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, he offers an account of the distinctive character of modernity as a necessary supplement to his better-known account of the moral development of the individual. His specific end in that work is critical: to show that the legal principle of the subordination of women is wrong and needs to be replaced. Mill makes his case by explaining the emergence of a distinctively modern outlook and arguing that it calls for equality as a condition of human development. In making his case, he offers something close to a genealogy of gender difference, but ultimately retreats to perfectionist commitments and an empiricist mode of explanation.

Mill’s famous notion of ‘experiments in living’ (Mill [1869] 1998: 89) implies a great deal of plasticity in human nature. One can and indeed should shape oneself into many different forms, as a response to the basic open-endedness of human existence. This process of individual self-development, furthermore, functions best when it proceeds without external constraint. In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill offers an account of the historical character of the normative commitments involved in this picture of the self. Although his argument focuses on the legal status of women, he draws his critical conclusion from a more general claim about the character of modernity. Modernity represents both the ‘fruit of a thousand years of experience’ (Mill [1869] 1988: 18) and that by which old customs are ‘undermined and loosened’ (2). And it offers, above all else, this distinctive conviction: ‘human beings are no longer born to their place in life … but are free to employ their faculties, and such favorable chances as offer, to achieve the lot which may appear to them the most desirable’ (17). This is deployed in order to criticize laws and institutions, but Mill is fully aware that this is not merely a legal doctrine. He offers it more fundamentally as a social doctrine, and one concerning the formation of the self.
In defending this social and personal ideal, he argues against the belief that it must be conditioned by natural, morally significant differences between the sexes. This is where his argument takes the shape of a genealogy of gender difference:

Women have always hitherto been kept, as far as regards spontaneous development, in so unnatural a state, that their nature cannot but have been greatly disguised and disfigured ... I shall presently show, that even the least contestable of the differences which may now exist, are such as may very well have been produced merely by circumstances, without any difference of natural capacity. (Mill 1988: 61)

He claims to provide a genetic narrative of entrenched gender differences to show that they could be contingent or arbitrary. From this speculative narrative, together with an analysis of our present epistemic condition with regard to gender differences, he concludes that they are in fact arbitrary and contingent rather than revelatory of natural capacity, and thus should ideally play no role in our practical deliberation. Here, then, we see most of the basic features of genealogy. Historical agency is present, as gender difference is the product of social institutions ruled by ‘the law of superior strength’ (1988: 7). The critical aspect is certainly present. Indeed, it even appears in its continental form, involving the causality of reason and the necessity of contradiction: customs and social forms that ‘have owed their existence to other causes than their soundness’ (4) are ‘discordant with the future and must necessarily disappear’ (17). And Mill’s outlook is cosmopolitan: he aims to show that present social conditions do not represent the human condition in general.

Mill’s departure from the genealogical framework comes with respect to the historical-hermeneutic. Mill seems to view the self as fluid or variable in its manifestations, but not in a way that requires historical interpretation. The variability, instead, simply provokes an epistemic problem, of recognizing the underlying nature that has been ‘distorted and disfigured’ (Mill
1988: 61). The correct approach is thus the regrettably speculative one of identifying the causal influences that have disfigured nature.

I have said that it cannot now be known how much of the existing mental differences between men and women is natural and how much artificial … but doubt does not forbid conjecture, and where certainty is unattainable, there may yet be the means of arriving at some degree of probability … I shall attempt to approach it by tracing the mental consequences of external influences. (72f)

History, for Mill, is not the field of possibility for self-relating agency, but that of evidence for an unchanging nature that should ultimately regulate our thoughts and ends, if only we had access to it.

Mill views his contemporary circumstances as the contingent outcome of a historical process whose preconditions are now forgotten, and thus decides to engage with the sphere of social meaning with a view to changing it. But he retreats from a genealogical approach to a more Humean approach to the explanation of change. This departure from the continental approach is, of course, unsurprising on Mill’s part and not necessarily a flaw, but it does seem to stem from a pair of ambivalences. One, the plasticity of the human that Mill invokes in his defense of liberty either manifests an underlying nature or is somehow more deeply indeterminate. Two, Mill embraces both a Humean causal view of human mentality and an Aristotelian view of nature’s purposes providing the measure of social progress and individual perfection. The rest of the genealogical tradition takes more care to address the plasticity in human nature and the relation between efficient and final causes. Without having resolved these tensions in his position, Mill does little to justify his starting commitments or the value of liberal culture.

7. Nietzsche’s Distinctiveness
Although it was Nietzsche who appropriated the term ‘genealogy,’ his philosophical approach to history was not especially distinctive. If we bracket off the substantive details of his narrative and focus on the basic features of their accounts – admittedly, a big qualification – then Hegel, Marx, and Mill share a broadly similar historical outlook. They each offer a historicized view of human freedom in a narrative that connects legitimacy with social practices and historical actuality. Nietzsche, without a category theory, materialism, or Mill’s mixture of commitments, arguably offers the least distinctive form of genealogy. There is one significant respect in which Nietzsche’s approach is distinctive, however: he forestalls and inverts his narrative’s vindicatory element. That vindicatory element, as with the others, is present; but it appears with such thoroughgoing irony that there is little hope of it ever being redeemed.

There is a more and a less innocuous-seeming version of this feature of Nietzsche’s approach. The more innocuous-seeming version appears in *The Antichrist*, written in 1888. In that work, the single overarching objection to Christianity concerns historical understanding. Nietzsche characterizes healthy cultures as having undertaken centuries of learning from experience, and then incorporated that learning in customs and habits until it becomes unconsciously authoritative. ‘There’, writes Nietzsche, ‘the yields of reason from long ages of experiment and uncertainty should be laid out for the most distant uses and the greatest, richest, most complete harvest possible be brought home’ (Nietzsche 1967–77d: 245/§58). But Christianity’s typical feature, according to Nietzsche, is that it seeks out such historical wisdom and destroys it in the name of a new era and a beyond. This is his greatest complaint:

The entire labor of the ancient world in vain: I have no words to express my feelings over something so monstrous. – And considering that its labor was preparatory, that it was just the foundation laid with granite self-consciousness for a labor of millennia, the entire meaning of the ancient world in vain! (Nietzsche 1967–77d: 247/§59).
Christianity has been productive: by destroying tradition, or whole ways of life, it opened up the possibility of a modern historical sense. But it did so at the cost of destroying healthy relationships with the past – indeed, with any past. And this problem is irremediable.

No triumph is possible here; the loss is permanent. The only response is to recuperate some of the historical experience by reinterpreting our historical self-understanding. But no conclusive measure of success could be even potentially available, and learning proceeds by way of painful failures. Above all, no triumph is possible because genealogy itself belongs to the Christian sense of the historical. Nietzsche writes, in discussing the Book of Manu, ‘A law book never recounts the use, the reasons, the casuistry in the prehistory of a law: then it would forfeit its imperative tone … The problem is precisely here’ (Nietzsche 1967–77d: 241/§57). Genealogy is this problem: in looking to the past with an eye to the open-ended future, it represents knowledge as ‘a form of asceticism’ (Nietzsche 1967–77d: 243/§57) that undermines the higher values. Turning this against the Christian sense of history combats ‘decadence’ (Nietzsche 1967–77d: 172/§6), but it also represents a decadence that has always been going on. Even the very hope to get beyond the Christian inheritance is part of the Christian inheritance, suggests Nietzsche. And yet there is no alternative.

The less innocuous-seeming form of this distinctive feature of Nietzsche’s approach appears in his claim that there is no alternative to the ascetic ideal. In the concluding sections of On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche identifies the ascetic ideal with the ‘One Goal’ of human history and then asks, ‘Why is the counterpart lacking? Where is the other “One Goal”?’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 396/III.23) Nietzsche considers the modern scientific conscience as a possible alternative, but then immediately argues, ‘it is not the contrary of the ascetic ideal, but rather its most recent and distinguished form’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 396/III.23). So Nietzsche
offers no helpful suggestion in concluding his genealogy, in part because of the unavailability of any good suggestion, but in part also because of the very project of trying to overcome the ascetic ideal is an exacerbation of the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche’s genealogy, unlike those of the others, promises no ultimate vindication, no constructive result, no future culmination; indeed, it subverts the very idea of vindication by suggesting that it would be another ascetic gesture. Seeking justification is both part of who we are in our projects of getting beyond the present, and also hopelessly entangled with the ascetic ideal. Nietzsche does concede that the modern person ‘at least turned out relatively well, at least is still capable of living, at least still says “Yes” to life’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 277/I.11). And he very unhelpfully suggests, ‘the ascetic ideal has at present only one kind of enemy who truly harms it: the comedian of this ideal’ (Nietzsche 1967–77c: 409/III.27). But in general, Nietzsche’s genealogy points to irony: any success in vanquishing the ascetic ideal leads deeper into its inescapability.

8. The Posthistory of Genealogy

Many of the contemporary invocations of ‘genealogy’ are perhaps arbitrary: they make a body of work seem better theorized by the name alone. Many contemporary invocations are connected to Nietzsche’s practice, but in a much looser sense than the one that I have suggested here. For example, Bernard Williams writes, ‘A genealogy is a narrative that tries to explain a cultural phenomenon by describing a way in which it came about, or could have come about, or might be imagined to have come about’ (Williams 2002: 20). Nietzsche arguably fits here – if we do not press too hard on ‘explain’ or the counterfactual options – but so does Hume, state of nature theory, and myth, according to Williams. Beyond such an appropriation of ‘genealogy,’ however, there remain others with a more direct lineage to Nietzsche and the nineteenth century
historical forms. The popularity of these appropriations is owed to Adorno’s formulation of ‘immanent critique’ and Foucault’s practice of genealogy. Here I cannot begin to offer accounts of their approaches, or even their divergences. Instead I merely wish to suggest how these approaches are continuous with the past in ways that lead into the present. In particular, these approaches can be seen as taking up versions of what Hegel called ‘absolute mediation’ that lead away from the distinctively philosophical to more wide-ranging accounts of self, desire, and society.

When Hegel referred to ‘absolute mediation’, he was referring to mediation by conceptual activity. So, for example, our experience of the world is not directly received from ‘outside’; rather, it is mediated by the conceptual repertoire that we have available and employ to structure our experience. ‘Absolute’ mediation suggests that everything is mediated and that everything is fully mediated: there is no element that even provisionally escapes the human production of determinations. That which does the mediating changes from Marx to Nietzsche and beyond, but the basic point endures. There is no moment of anything outside of our social or cultural conditions within the entire human world; the merely artificial does not come into contact with the purely natural; mediation is everywhere and must itself be illuminated if we are to understand even the most familiar phenomena. Adorno’s version of this point is called, simply, ‘infinite mediation’ (Adorno 1967: 7), and entails that nothing is ever ‘to be taken simply at face value’ (Adorno 1967: 7). Foucault expresses a similar point in terms of the ‘rule of immanence’ (Foucault [1976] 1978: 98) and his analytics of power: ‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power’ (Foucault 1978: 95). On Foucault’s conception, nothing is outside of power because power produces, constitutes, or conditions everything.
Contemporary genealogy, following Adorno and Foucault, has drawn two consequences from absolute mediation that owe more to Nietzsche than to anyone else in the genealogical tradition. The first is to find something sinister in it. For Hegel the explicit recognition of absolute mediation was a mark of success; even for Marx it suggested that, as the product of human activity, everything was liable to be changed. But for Adorno and Foucault it suggests that there is no possibility of human self-liberation: nothing that we could try to accomplish could possibly count as a departure from our subjection. Adorno writes, for example, ‘Of course, even the immanent method is eventually overtaken by this. It is dragged into the abyss by its object’ (Adorno 1967: 34). Foucault is slightly more sanguine about the possibility of genuine resistance. In an early essay, genealogy effects this by introducing ‘discontinuity into our very being’ (Foucault [1971] 1977: 154). Later, the genealogical enterprise is meant to help ‘counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasure, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance’ (Foucault 1978: 157). Even here, however, the relationship to power seems permanently ambiguous and thus at best there is a ‘perpetual danger of relapse’ (Foucault 1977: 160).

The second consequence of absolute mediation is that everything has become the subject of genealogy. Given absolute mediation, no longer only Nietzsche’s ‘highest values’ are the subject of genealogy. Chains of determination lead back everywhere: from the self and social institutions and desires into all the constituting activities that have shaped what we are. With absolute mediation, then, every element of the human world becomes a subject for genealogy. And thus genealogy is no longer a distinctively philosophical enterprise. Instead it looks critically everywhere, to interpret everything that shapes the human.14
Any list of examples must be radically incomplete. For some examples within philosophy, see Agamben 2000, Nichols 2002, and Williams 2002. For examples from other disciplines, see Benn Michaels (1992), Der Derian (1987), Liu (2002), Miller (1998), Saldívar (1991), and Turner (2000). See also David Owen’s valuable review essay (Owen 2005). I discuss Foucault’s important appropriation of genealogy below; most of these examples (and many besides) refer to Foucault.

For an example of an early usage, see Herodotus 1920: 448/II.143, where he writes of ‘genealogizing oneself’ (geneēlogēsantē heōuton). Nietzsche’s book is of course On the Genealogy of Morals (1887); he had not used the word ‘genealogy’ in any previously published work. For an explanation of the difference between genealogy as pedigree and genealogy in Nietzsche’s sense, see Geuss 1994.

This perhaps explains why, despite its popularity, the new sense of genealogy is absent from dictionaries, except for this bland attempt from Merriam-Webster: ‘an account of the origin and historical development of something’ (520).

I discuss some additional reasons below. The popularity of ‘genealogy’ no doubt also benefits from it being a common term (unlike, say, ‘historical materialism’) that nevertheless does not suffer from competition from with common meaning, since, outside of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the U.S. Senate, no one cares about family pedigree anymore.

Nietzsche 1967–77e: 350(‘Why I Write Such Good Books’, Beyond Good and Evil, §1). Translations of Nietzsche are mine and emphasis is original unless otherwise noted.

Although ‘immanent’ and ‘critique’ had currency long beforehand – on which see Benhabib 1986 – to the best of my knowledge the phrase ‘immanent critique’ stems from Adorno 1967 and Adorno 1973. Here, however, I am more interested in a general idea of immanent critique,
and not specifically in Adorno’s notion of it. In particular, immanent critique as I characterize it does not represent a distinctive ‘method,’ as it does, for example, in Adorno 1967: 31 or Jay 1986: 266.

7 I discuss some of the textual difficulties in identifying Nietzsche’s view of genealogy in Guay 2005: 355.

8 On the identification of Hume, somewhat oddly, as an English psychologist, see Clark and Swensen 1998: 129. For an attempt to read genealogy as a Humean enterprise, see Leiter 2002.

9 On the differences, especially, see Ansell Pearson 1996.

10 See, for example, Adorno 2006: 121 and Bernstein 2001: 338ff.


12 By claiming that the rational is the wirklich and the wirklich rational, Hegel shows his willingness to attribute rationality to the movements prior to the ultimate resolution of contradiction; Marx, despite occasional encomia for the bourgeoisie, is somewhat less sanguine about resolutions that generate new contradictions.


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