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*On Genealogy*  
AMIA SRINIVASAN

HOSTING AND PUBLISHING TALKS IN PHILOSOPHY SINCE 1880

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ON GENEALOGY

AMIA SRINIVASAN  
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

MONDAY, 4 FEBRUARY 2019

17.30-19.15

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Amia Srinivasan is an Associate Professor of philosophy at Oxford and a tutorial fellow at St John's College. Previously she was a permanent lecturer at University College London and a Prize Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford. She works on topics in epistemology, metaphilosophy, political philosophy and feminism, and is currently writing a book on the genealogy of belief. Her essays and criticism have appeared in *The New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and elsewhere. She is an associate editor of *Mind*, and a contributing editor of the *London Review of Books*.

#### EDITORIAL NOTE

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## ON GENEALOGY

AMIA SRINIVASAN

Each of us finds himself not just already in the world, but already in a particular world: a particular moment in history, a particular culture, a particular family, a particular language, a particular body. We are, in Heidegger's phrase, *thrown* into the world. What is more, our representations of the world – our beliefs, values, and concepts – are radically shaped by these particularities, these contingent facts about where we find ourselves in the space of possibility. What are we to make of this? Am I justified in having the beliefs, values and concepts I do if I have them only because of my particular, contingent history? What reason do I have for thinking that my beliefs are true, or that my values are genuinely valuable, or that my concepts grasp the contours of reality, if I could so easily have held contrary beliefs or values, or cut up the world in terms of rival concepts? Naturally, my beliefs *seem* true to me; likewise, my values seem genuinely valuable, and my concepts seem genuinely apt. They are, after all, *my* beliefs, values and concepts. But would not my beliefs also seem true to me, my values valuable, and my concepts apt, even if they had been altogether different – if a different historical or cultural formation had endowed me with a worldview radically unlike the one I in fact have? What am I to do with this other me, this shadow me, this me who believes the opposite of everything I believe, who values what I disvalue, who articulates the world in terms of concepts that are alien to my own? What if she is the right one, and I am the shadow?

This series of questions gives voice to what I call 'genealogical anxiety':<sup>1</sup> the anxiety that the causal origins of our representations, once revealed, will somehow undermine, destabilise or cast doubt on the legitimacy or standing of those representations. I say 'somehow' because it is not at all obvious just why or how genealogical revelations might have such a destabilising or undermining effect. Likewise, it is not clear what exactly might be meant by 'legitimacy' or 'standing'. But what does seem obvious is that we humans, at least in some places and at some times, are prone to genealogical anxiety. This paper is an exploration of genealogical anxiety in its historical, epistemological and political dimensions.

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<sup>1</sup> I first introduce this phrase in Srinivasan (2011), 'Armchair v Laboratory', *London Review of Books*; see also Srinivasan (2015), 'The Archimedean Urge', *Philosophical Perspectives*.



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