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Nietzschean Genealogy and Philosophical Methodology

1. Introduction: Genealogy Against Definition

"Today it is impossible to say clearly why we really punish; all ideas in which an entire process is semiotically summarized elude definition. Only something which has no history is capable of being defined" (Nietzsche, GM II.13)

Other examples:
- Raymond Geuss on "liberalism," "Christianity," etc.
- Dipesh Chakrabarty (*Provincializing Europe*) on "modernity," "progress," "public sphere"
- Said (*Orientalism*) on "the Orient"

Questions:
1. How does genealogy challenge the search for definitions?
2. Why is this challenge theoretically and practically significant?

2. Deconstructive Genealogy: It's Nature and Purpose

Deconstructive Genealogy: A historical account of elements of a domain (e.g. moral judgments, political commitments) that suggests that the domain is "fragmented" and "internally conflicted"

Two elements:
- *Collation stories:* historical accounts in which elements of a domain originate from distinct, independent sources
    - Ex: history of our political ideals in which pro-capitalist and pro-democratic ideals arose and developed independenly
    - Suggest that the domain "fragmented" – the elements do not "hang together"
- *Reaction stories:* historical accounts in which some elements of the domain are introduced or modified *in self-conscious rejection* of other elements
    - Ex: Nietzsche's "slave revolt" of morality, Manin on representative government
    - Suggest that the domain will contain "internal tensions"
        - "Tensions" may be contradictions but are not only contradictions

Variety of domains:
- Texts (e.g. the Bible)
- Considered judgements ("intuitions")
- Social practices and institutions (e.g. capitalism and democracy)

DG shows that no philosophical account of a domain can meet two constraints:

> *Fit:* The account aligns with our (initial) considered judgements about the domain (it is not deeply revisionary)

Unity: The account represents the domain as sufficiently "unified" in the relevant sense, as forming a coherent and systematic whole

Caveat: "different" historical sources may not be *independent*
- Example: Physical judgements come from a diversity of sources (perception, high school math teacher, Youtube), but they are not fragmented or internally consistent
- Moral judgements?

3. Deconstructive Genealogy and Philosophical Definition

Deconstructive genealogies challenge philosophical definitions by undermining the assumptions embedded in the methods used to arrive at them

How do we figure out the definitions of important concepts?
- Intuitive judgements about the concept (e.g. MORAL RIGHTNESS) regarding (i) its application, (ii) the purpose it serves, (iii) its theoretical role, (iv) its connection to certain metaphysical facts
- "Unity" consists in proposing a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for correct application of the concept
- Deconstructive genealogy undermines this project by providing collation and reaction stories suggesting the elements of this domain cannot be unified
- Limited scope: only challenges attempts to provide *univocal* definitions of concepts that *capture most of our intuitions*

4. Extending to Reflective Equilibrium

Many philosophical projects are not about definitions
- Example: Geuss's *History and Illusion in Politics*
    - Our current political commitments include (1) the modern state as the basic political unit, (2) liberalism, (3) democracy, (4) human rights, and (5) a capitalist economy
    - There is no word (concept?) that corresponds to this set of commitments, or at least one need not make that assumption
    - Target is attempts to "make sense" of how these commitments hang together using reflective equilibrium
    - "One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or justify these preexisting opinions to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system" (Lewis)

- Reflective Equilibrium:
    1. *Start* with a set of considered judgements ("intuitions")
    2. *Extend* that set of judgements
    3. Try to *render these judgements coherent and mutually supporting*. When conflicts are found, consider ways of resolving them, and repeat process, until we reach coherent set of principles and judgments (the "equilibrium")

<u>Why Reflective Equilibrium is Constrained by Fit</u>
- *Domain:* Considered judgments are often the objects of investigation
  - Moral theory is "the attempt to describe our moral capacity; or, in the present case, one may regard a theory of justice as describing our sense of justice" (Rawls, TJ, p. 46/41 rev.); also Kolodney
- *Deliberative Use:* Fit is required for the results of method to be justified
  - Decisions about revision in cases of conflict are constrained by fit
  - Moorean argument: end result constrained by fit
- *Persuasive Use:* Fit is required for method to be useful for rational persuasion

<u>Why Reflective Equilibrium Aims at Unity</u>
- *Deliberative Use:* Lack of unity decreases confidence in result, suggests individual elements of domain need to be modified/are not justified
- *Aim of Understanding:* RE aims to help us achieve *systematic rational understanding,* and systematic rational understanding requires unity
  - As Brandom (2009) writes, "Philosophers aim at a kind of understanding, not, more narrowly, at a kind of knowledge" (113).
- *Practical Use:* Systematic rational understanding helps us achieve certain practical aims (Rawls)
  - *Conflict adjudication*: Help adjudicate political conflicts by finding dimensions of overlap and consensus among ostensibly competing views. These conflicts are often reflected in our general stock of intuitive judgements, e.g. ostensible conflicts between "liberty" and "equality"
  - *Orientation*: Guide our political aims and decisions through a holistic grasp of how our different aspirations hang together, and how they are connected to our social practices and institutions.
  - *Reconciliation*: Help reconcile ourselves to our social world by showing how features are frustrating or objectionable are necessary to realize our more fundamental normative aspirations
  - *Reasonable hope*: Show us how the social world allows us to rationally hope for a (realistically) utopia

5. **Deconstructive Genealogy as "Counter-Reconciliatory" and "Anti-Noetic"**
RE aiming at unity and constrained by fit reflects more universal aspirations:
- Theoretical aspiration of rational *self*-understanding
- Associated practical aspirations (reconciliation, orientation, etc)

Even if they cannot be *fully* met, should we continue to pursue these aspirations?

DG often employed for "counter-reconciliatory" ends. Reasons *not* to pursue these aspirations:
- Danger of engaging in ideologically objectionable apologetics
- Danger of "flattening"

<u>Upshot</u>: Such "counter-reconciliatory" philosophical projects can serve both critical and affirmative aims

Parallel reasons for avoiding rational understanding of others in social theory:
- Legitimating the illegitimate
  - "There is an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding. Not understanding was my iron law during all the years of preparing and directing *Shoah*" (Claude Lanzmann)
- "Flattening" other cultures can serve pernicious ideological ends
  - Trying to render "the Orient" comprehensible is objectionable, as it "reduce[s] the Orient to a kind of human flatness, which exposed its characteristics easily to scrutiny and removed from it its complicating humanity" (Said 1973, 150)

Tension between causal understanding and "higher" aim of philosophy ("making sense")
- Deconstructive genealogy challenges "sense-making" → *anti-neotic*