Nietzschean Genealogy and Philosophical Methodology

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Abstract: This paper explores how Nietzschean "deconstructive genealogies" challenge core elements of philosophical methodology and social thought. Deconstructive genealogies reveal fragmentation and internal conflict within domains often presumed to be unified, such as our moral judgements or political commitments. By doing so, they challenge attempts to impose coherence and systematicity on these domains. Such genealogies can be marshalled to undermine conceptual analysis and philosophical projects that employ reflective equilibrium. Moreover, inappropriate imposition of coherence and systematicity can be a problem not only in philosophy but also in social theory. The upshot is that such genealogies are often employed for what I call "counter-reconciliatory" projects in philosophy and "anti-noetic" approaches in social theory.

1. **Introduction**

In a famous discussion in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche argues that the history of punishment reveals punishment cannot be "defined" (GM II.13). The techniques, motivations, and functions of punishment have evolved over time, and these cannot be distilled by the kind of compact, non-historical definition that philosophers since Socrates have traditionally pursued for key philosophical concepts. Consequently, the question "what is punishment?" has no answer.

The idea that genealogies, at least of a certain kind, can challenge the classic philosophical aim of providing definitions is a recurring theme in the reception of Nietzsche's work. For instance, in his

recent philosophical autobiography *Not Thinking Like a Liberal,* Raymond Geuss (2022) describes how his thinking is influenced by "the Nietzschean claim" that "it is impossible to give formal definitions of largescale historical movements like Christianity, communism, or liberalism" (23). This claim, Geuss thinks, is highly significant, and appreciating it will help us see ways that much contemporary moral and political thinking is misguided and objectionably ideological.

This idea has also played a significant role in social theory that has been inspired by Nietzsche. For instance, post-colonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues in his *Provincializing Europe* that genealogy can illustrate the problems with purported definitions of terms like "modernization" and "progress." According to Chakrabarty, the problem with historical and social scientific work that employs these concepts is not just they are operating with the wrong definitions. It is that looking for definitions *at all* for such terms is a problem, as it fails to recognize the plurality of historical experiences and objectionably assimilates minority cultures to dominant ones.[1] Edward Said (1978) makes a similar point in his discussion of Orientalism—the problem with Orientalist thinking lies not only in the content of pernicious stereotypes but also in the very act of seeking to define "the Orient."

This use of genealogy to challenge the projects of definition in philosophy and social theory is quite different from other uses to which it has recently been put in philosophy. Current discussions of genealogy typically either focus on the epistemology of debunking arguments (e.g., Sinhababu 2007, Kahane 2011, White 2011, Vavova 2014, Srinivasan 2015) or on the use idealized state-of-nature stories for functional analysis (Williams 2002, Fricker 2007, Queloz 2021). The project of undercutting

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[1] For instance, he writes, "To see birth as genealogy and not as a clear-cut point of origin…—as Nietzsche said—… is to open up the question of the relationship between diversity of life practices or life-worlds and universalizing political philosophies, which remain the global heritage of the Enlightenment" (Chakrabarty 2000, 148).

the search for definitions is distinct from these kinds of projects and, as we will see, may even be in tension with them.

However, while it is clear that many thinkers in the genealogical tradition think that genealogy can be used to undermine key elements of philosophical methodology and social-scientific thinking, it is not clear how genealogy is supposed to accomplish this. First, there are questions about how genealogy is supposed to challenge the search for definitions at all. For instance, gold has a history—one in which its functions change significantly over historical time[2]—yet it also, arguably, has a definition. So why couldn't the same be true for punishment, liberalism, modernization, or other concepts that we might genealogize?

Second, why should this challenge to definitions be theoretically and practical significant? Theoretically, while the history of philosophy is certainly strewn with attempts to construct definitions of key concepts, it is not clear that this is still an overarching aim of philosophical practice.[3] When it comes to social theory, definitions seem to play even less of an important role. Practically, one might wonder why the search for definitions should ever be objectionable. Maybe it is a waste of time in

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[2] The cultural and social meaning of gold has changed substantially over historical time. In Ancient Egypt, gold was used in many ceremonial objects due to its association with the afterlife, whereas it was understood as a symbol of power in classical antiquity. Nowadays gold is many things: a store of value, an investment opportunity, a material for fine jewelry, as well as for advanced technology. Other materials have similarly complex histories.

[3] Many philosophical projects nowadays are not best construed as looking for definitions, mostly because many philosophers accept that concept use is complex and plural (e.g. Quilty-Dunn 2021), and it is not obvious whether definitions provide so much insight anyway (see Huddleston 2018).

some cases, but who can be harmed by seeking clear definitions for our concepts? Aren't clear definitions, other things being equal, good things?

I will argue that what I will call Nietzschean "deconstructive" genealogies *do* pose a challenge for philosophical definitions and that this challenge is part of a broader critique of philosophical methodology and social thought—a broader critique that challenges the search for unity in many domains of philosophical and social theoretic interest. If, as Wilfred Sellars (1962) says, "the aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" (1), then the significance of genealogy for philosophical methodology is to show where things *don't* hang together.

I will start by discussing how deconstructive genealogies pose a problem for certain projects of philosophical definition, and then argue that the problem generalizes to many uses of reflective equilibrium methods that are not used in the service of providing definitions. I will then argue that these are cases of a more general phenomenon in which we are looking achieve systematic rational understanding of a domain by imposing unity or systematicity on it, where such understanding is unlikely to be available. Although there are compelling reasons to seek to unity and systematicity, resisting this impulse can be normatively important in certain contexts. Thus, deconstructive genealogies are often used for what I will call a "counter-reconciliatory" and "anti-noetic" form of philosophy and social thought, at least in the domains to which they apply.

The discussion will be organized as follows. I will begin by specifying the kind of genealogy we will be discussing, which I have called "deconstructive genealogies" (Prescott-Couch 2024) (§2). I will then consider how genealogies of this kind might undermine the search for philosophical definitions (§3). In §4, I will discuss ways in which this challenge might be extended to other areas of philosophy that do not concern the search for definitions and argue that it poses a problem for the

method of "reflective equilibrium." §5 considers why this challenge is practically important in both philosophy and social theory. §6 summarizes the discussion.

2. Deconstructive Genealogy: Its Nature and Purpose

I intend to examine how "genealogy" can inform philosophical methodology. However, my focus is not on the broader role for historical consciousness in philosophy but rather on a specific type of historical project that in earlier work I have described as "deconstructive genealogy" (Prescott-Couch 2024).[4]

Deconstructive genealogies aim to show that some domain is less "unified"—more fragmentary and internally conflicted—than one might initially suppose. This conception of genealogy is rooted in a particular way of understanding the nature and significance of Nietzsche's genealogy in *GM*. In a famous discussion of Nietzsche, Foucault (1978) claims that Nietzsche's genealogy opposes the "search for origins." Many historical accounts aim to trace a phenomenon back to a singular origin (or *Ursprung*). For example, a historical account might trace morality's emergence to society's need to regulate individual behavior given limited altruism, thus identifying a single underlying origin. By contrast, according to Foucault, Nietzsche's genealogies aim to uncover the diverse and independent factors that converge to shape a phenomenon (the phenomenon's *Herkunft*). For instance, contemporary morality reflects a complex amalgam of influences, including slave morality, master morality, and the "morality of custom." A history that describes a *Herkunft* rather than an *Ursprung* is a deconstructive genealogy.

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[4] Geuss (2020) has labeled this kind of project "genealogy as dispersal of purported unitary origin and dissolution of meanings" (75). I find "deconstructive genealogy" pithier.

To see why multiple independent origins might suggest internal fragmentation and conflict, consider a stylized example:

> *Collation:* Your friend has emailed you a document. As you're reading it over, you're having trouble figuring out how all the claims fit together. You mention this to your friend, who smiles. *Of course* you're having difficulty, he tells you. The document is a copy-and-paste job constructed from two different essays written by two completely independent authors discussing different subjects. He sends you an updated document indicating which section of the document corresponds to which essay.

While your friend has not told you anything about the document's content, he has given you information that indicates you're unlikely to find a singular consistent argument in it. You should rather expect to find two unconnected arguments, and the history of the document indicates where those different arguments are likely to be found. Such information about the text's origin can help you "structure your interpretation" of the text—it gives you guidance about where you might look for logical and stylistic unity with it.

One can imagine variants of this example that will change how you structure your interpretation in other ways. For instance, imagine that the two documents that have been spliced together concern opposing views on the same issue (like a point-counterpoint newspaper format), or that the document has been edited by someone to suggest a different view from the original author's. In such cases, you would expect not only fragmentation but significant incoherence.

The case of interpreting texts has analogues in other domains. Instead of the set of sentences in a text, we can start with a set of considered judgements and look for ways of making sense of them. If we discover that some of those judgements have one origin, and others a distinct independent origin, then it is unlikely they can be unified.

A similar point can be made with respect to institutions and practices. We can "interpret" institutions and practices by identifying functional, symbolic, and constitutive connections among their elements.[5] However, if we discover that a set of institutions and practices developed independently of one another (or in opposition to one another), then we have reason to think that there may be few such connections. To see this, note that practices can be conjoined in disunified manner in the way analogous to how texts can be so conjoined. For instance, while there might be a function of representative government, there is no function of the conjunction of the practice of representative government *and,* say, that of having cereal for breakfast. Similarly, according to Geuss (2001), there is no function of the conjunction of representative government and capitalism and liberalism. Rather, we have an arbitrary historical conjunction.[6]

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[5] A brief note on these distinctions: Practices serve purposes—they do things for us—and analyzing them often involves uncovering their purpose or function. However, practices are more than mere tools for producing specific outcomes, and their elements are not solely connected through functionality. Practices are also meaning-giving activities. They express our values, symbolically link us to others and our environment, and play a constitutive role in shaping our thoughts, transforming bodily movements into specific kinds of actions, and forming us into particular kinds of individuals. When philosophers "interpret" practices, they aim to make explicit these functional, symbolic, and constitutive relationships.

[6] By contrast, Hegel's social theory is a prime example of a theory that aims to demonstrate that seemingly conflicting institutions within modern society form a coherent system. For instance, while it might appear that (i) the state, (ii) a market-oriented civil society, and (iii) the bourgeois family stand in various tensions to one another, on the Hegelian view they form a coherent system, working together to enable modern individuals to enjoy both individuality and community. See Hardimon 1992

When applied to practices, the central aim of deconstructive genealogies is to show that no interpretation of a practice can satisfy the following two constraints:

Fit: The practice as described in the interpretation is sufficiently similar to the practice as currently constituted (the interpretation is not deeply 'revisionary' of the practice)

Unity: The interpretation holds that the practice is sufficiently 'unified' in the relevant sense

As we will see, these constraints are important, since many interpretations aim to *make sense* of our practices by showing that they have an unappreciated coherence or systematicity. By indicating that there is no such interpretation, genealogy undermines such sense-making efforts and challenges attempts to impose such coherence.

In order to employ deconstructive genealogies to reach these conclusions, one needs to rely on some background assumptions. This is because the way in which history can inform us about interpretative structure is complex, and there are more subtleties than the examples above might suggest. For instance, the fact that judgements in some domain have *distinct* sources does not necessarily suggest the set of such judgements will be disunified. Here is an example to illustrate the point:

Problem Set: Imagine you are correcting a problem set in which there is a problem with multiple (interconnected) parts, each of which builds on the other. You then realize that you mixed things up, and the answers from one part are from one student, and the answers from another part are from another student. However, those answers nevertheless go together. The overall answer sheet is unified, even though it is the product of two distinct sources.

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for an accessible summary. Similar assumptions, although expressed less explicitly, are often made by thinkers in the critical theory tradition inspired by Hegel.

In this case, the sources are *distinct* but they are not *independent*: there is some background mechanism that is coordinating responses in a way that yields unity. In this case, the mechanism may be *response to mathematical reality*. The students arrive at answers that cohere because they arrive at the *correct* answers to the part of the problem set, and mathematical reality itself is coherent.

Mechanisms by which we reliably respond to an independent and coherent reality are one type of mechanism by which the responses of different sources may be coordinated to yield cohesive results. There are also sociological mechanisms. For instance, perhaps you taught both students the wrong techniques to find the solution to the problem, which resulted in both coming to wrong but interconnected answers.

Both of these kinds of mechanisms can be at play in many of the domains that interest scientists, philosophers, and social theorists. For instance, perhaps I receive some of my judgements about the physical world from sense perception, some from my high school physics teacher, and some from professors on YouTube. My set of judgements about the physical world may nevertheless be coherent because objective physical reality is influencing each source.

More controversially, perhaps my moral judgements are unified despite coming from different sources. Maybe I have received some of my moral views from pagan thinking, some from Christianity, and some from market-oriented libertarianism. If there is some coherent moral reality that pagans, Christians, and libertarians are all reliably responding to, then my judgements may cohere, despite the disunity of sources.

As we will see, these points can impose significant limitations on the use of deconstructive genealogical arguments, limits that explain why they are powerful in some cases but would seem absurd in others. They are most powerful for domains in which we assume anti-realism and we assume or

argue that there are not deeper sociological mechanisms that coordinate the outputs of different sources.[7]

3. Deconstructive Genealogy and the Search for Philosophical Definitions

Much philosophical discussion is structured around so-called "Socratic Questions" that take the form of "what is X?" For instance, a philosophy might ask "what is justice?", "what is knowledge?", or, more recently, "what is causation"?" Following Huddleston (2018), let us call answers to these questions "philosophical definitions."

Deconstructive genealogies challenge the search for definitions by undermining the assumptions embedded in the methods used to arrive at them. Take, for example, the attempt to define the concept MORAL RIGHTNESS. The way we go about trying to figure out the definition is by starting with a set of intuitive judgements regarding the concept. Most of these intuitions will be about the concept's intuitive extension—for instance, judgements about concrete cases, such as whether some action is intuitively right. Other intuitions might be more abstract, relating to the purposes that the concept serves (or could serve), its theoretical role, or its connection certain metaphysical facts. For instance, we might have intuitive judgements about the functional role of morality—e.g. increasing social welfare, counteracting altruism failure—or its conceptual role (see Wedgewood 2001), or about its connection to some metaphysically privileged natural kind (Williams 2018). A successful definition

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[7] Since these arguments work best if we assume anti-realism, we have reason to think that, when it comes to Nietzsche's genealogy, Nietzsche is assuming anti-realism rather than using genealogy to argue for it (see Prescott-Couch 2023).

would "fit" and "unify" this domain of judgements.[8] In the case of philosophical definition, the ideal kind of "unity" at issue takes the form of a compact set of necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept.

A successful deconstructive genealogy of our moral intuitions would suggest that there is no single univocal definition of moral rightness because our moral intuitions have multiple, independent sources. For instance, imagine that a genealogy reveals that some of these intuitions derive from pagan traditions, others from Christian influences, and still others from more recent market-liberal ideologies, with no underlying mechanism aligning the influence of these different sources. In light of the sources' independence, it would seem unlikely that a single, univocal account of moral rightness that could encompass and unify this domain of intuitions. Rather, such a genealogy would suggest that we partition the domain of our moral judgements, "fragmenting" the moral (see Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley 2013, Scanlon 1998 pg. 171-177, Nagel 2012).

So this is how deconstructive genealogy challenges the definitional project. However, note that the deconstructive genealogy targets only philosophical definitions that aim to *capture most of our intuitions.* If a philosopher is willing to disregard many intuitions—perhaps by prioritizing functional considerations or metaphysical considerations at the expense of case judgements—then such a resulting definition will be compatible with deconstructive genealogy. This is why, for instance, the history of gold does not pose a problem for constructing a definition of gold—our definition of gold is rooted in features of a metaphysically natural kind rather than a systematization of our intuitions.

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[8] Different "meta-philosophies" might assign different weights to these different factors. For instance, those who think that certain terms are defined by their connection to natural kinds might privilege the connection to certain metaphysical facts, while those that take an "engineering" approach to concepts might look at their potential practical utility.

Consequently, deconstructive genealogy does not target philosophical definition as such, but rather certain kinds of definitional projects.

4. Extending the Challenge to Reflective Equilibrium

4.1 Deconstructive Genealogy and Reflective Equilibrium

While deconstructive genealogy may pose a problem for certain definitional projects, its significance for philosophical methodology extends beyond this. Challenging the definitional project is not the primary way that proponents of this style of genealogical argument see it as challenging core assumptions in analytic philosophy.

Consider Raymond Geuss's *History and Illusion in Politics,* a work inspired by Nietzsche's genealogy. Geuss argues that the dominant political commitments of Western societies are fundamentally incoherent, and this incoherence becomes clearer when we examine the historical development of these commitments. According to Geuss, these commitments include (1) the modern state as the basic political unit, (2) liberalism, (3) democracy, (4) human rights, and (5) a capitalist economy. A historical understanding of how these ideas and institutions emerged suggests not only a lack of coherence among them but also that they are in serious tension with one another.

 Note that these points make no reference to anything about *definitions.* Geuss (2001) writes that his interest "is in the practical coherence of a certain framework." However, there need not be a *name* or *concept* for this framework. And even if there were, we need not think of the project of analyzing it is primarily about giving a *definition* of it. The pursuit of philosophical definition is a narrower aspect of a broader philosophical goal: to develop a systematic *theory* of a domain that brings coherence and structure to our judgments within it.

The challenge posed by deconstructive genealogy is therefore not primarily to the project of giving definitions but rather to a particular set of assumptions that one might employ in *coming up* with a

definition—for instance, assumptions that we should try, as much as possible, to vindicate the intuitive judgements we start with and do so by revealing how they can be shown to be (or made) coherent. These assumptions are widely held in philosophy and are central to the method of "reflective equilibrium."

"Reflective equilibrium" has been understood in a number of ways. However, following Cath (2016) and Scanlon (2003), we can characterize it as involving a three-stage procedure:

First, we start with a set of considered judgements ("intuitions").[9] These will often be judgments about particular cases, but they may also include mid-level and highly abstract principles, as well as (inchoate) reasons for the judgements.

Second, we seek to *extend* that set of judgements. If our starting points concern particular judgments, identify (using abduction) theoretical principles that might explain those judgements. If the starting points are broader theoretical principles, identify (using deduction) the implications of these principles for particular cases.

Third, we try to bring these extended set of judgements into harmony by rendering them coherent and mutually supporting. When conflicts are found, modifications are made, and then the process repeats until we reach a coherent set of principles and judgments (the "equilibrium").

The basic reason to think that deconstructive genealogy challenges the methodology of reflective equilibrium is that such genealogies suggest there is no interpretation of our judgements that is both

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[9] This step may itself be decomposes into two steps. First, we start with a set of judgements, which are may or may not be considered. Then, one filters out that domain for judgements that are the result of bias or poor reasoning to arrive at "considered" judgements.

unified and aligns with our intuitive starting points. However, reflective equilibrium appears to rely on a commitment to achieving both unity and fit with our initial intuitions.[10]

Let's unpack this reasoning. Say we're interested in providing a philosophical account of some domain like "morality" or "current political values." By "philosophical account," I mean whatever the ideal endpoint of philosophical reflection is—this is generally a "theory," but it might also include claims about more concrete cases, mid-level principles, and other things.[11] The reasoning above relies on three claims:

1. *Deconstructive Genealogy:* A deconstructive genealogy of a domain D reveals that there is no philosophical account of D that (i) vindicates most of our considered judgements regarding D and (ii) is unified

2. *RE Committed to Fit:* To achieve reflective equilibrium with respect to a philosophical account of D, that account must vindicate most of our considered judgements regarding D

3. *RE Committed to Unity:* To achieve reflective equilibrium respect to a philosophical account of D, that account must be unified

If all these claims are true, then reflective equilibrium cannot be achieved. We have already discussed the meaning and justification of the first claim. I will discuss the other two.

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[10] An almost clinical expression of this idea comes from David Lewis: "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 1973, 88).

[11] Elgin (2017) also uses the notion of an "account" in discussing the object of reflective equilibrium.

4.2 Is Reflective Equilibrium Committed to Fit?

According to the second claim, the method of reflective equilibrium is committed to vindicating our considered judgements. Reflective equilibrium seems *prima facie* committed to fit because, as many critics have noted (Singer 1974, Hare 1973, Brandt 1979, Harman 2003), the method seems *conservative*.[12]

One reason the method seems conservative is that its proponents often characterize its aim as descripting, interpreting, or capturing our views about the domain. For instance, in *Theory of Justice,* Rawls describes the aim of moral theory as "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" (TJ, p. 46/41 rev.). He goes to analogize the moral philosophy to uncovering Chomskyian grammar, and describing testing principles against our considered judgments in a way that a scientific hypothesis may be tested against data (Rawls 1951). These analogies suggest that reflective equilibrium aims to *describe* our moral viewpoints, albeit through principles that are not explicit objects of awareness. Moreover, Rawls typically refers to "our" moral judgments, suggesting that the exercise is not personal but more broadly sociological.

Rawls' language is by no means idiosyncratic in contemporary philosophy. For instance, in his recent *The Pecking Order,* Nico Kolodney (2023) describes his book as aiming to capture "what drives much of our political thought and feeling" (6), starting from claims about how "our moral thinking" (15) is organized. Such language is common throughout the field.

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[12] As Gil Harman (2003) has written, "The method is conservative in that we start with our present views and try to make the least change that will best promote the coherence of our whole view."

There are a number of reasons that moral and political philosophers talk this way. One is epistemic modesty: describing our moral sensibility seems more attainable and less presumptuous than attempting to describe an independent moral reality. Another is that this way of talking corresponds to the idea that one of philosophy's aims is self-understanding.[13] In order for the method to provide self-understanding, it would be need to yield results that capture and "make sense" of pre-existing judgements.

However, many have disputed that the method is as conservative as critics claim. For instance, Scanlon (2003) argues that we should distinguish the "descriptive" from the "deliberative" use of reflective equilibrium. The descriptive use aims to systematize what we *do* think, but the deliberative use aims to help us figure out what *to* think. While the descriptive conception may be committed to fit, the deliberative conception is not, according to these defenders.

There are two reasons to think that a deliberative use of reflective equilibrium may not be committed to *Fit*. First, we may be able to gain a greater degree of coherence by revising many of our judgements, and because the requirement of coherence does not as such discriminate between different ways of rendering our judgements coherent, it seems open to radical revision of a subset of judgements. This reasoning, of course, depends on assuming that reflective equilibrium employs a coherentist epistemology.

However, reflective equilibrium is not necessarily committed to coherentism and may even require a non-coherentist foundation to be plausible. While it is often assumed that the justification the method provides comes primarily through the increased coherence it achieves, this assumption is not required and often implicitly denied. For instance, Scanlon (2014, chapter 4) argues that, when it comes to justification, the "equilibrium" itself is not what matters. Instead, justification stems from

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[13] A less flattering description might be "rationalistic auto-anthropology."

the quality of the substantive judgements and the soundness of the reasoning employed in the process.[14]

Moreover, it is good that reflective equilibrium is not committed to coherentism, as coherentism is beset by notorious difficulties. At least in its simple forms, coherentism that lacks any constraints on revision might recommend revising views that we hold dear. Jeff McMahan (2013) makes the point clearly:

> Indeed, it seems possible, though not likely, that a coherentist approach to the pursuit of reflective equilibrium could lead ultimately to the rejection of every belief with which one started. Both these suppositions, however, are alien to moral life and moral reflection. There are some moral beliefs that we simply cannot give up just for the sake of greater coherence. Sometimes we must hold tenaciously to certain convictions even when it seems that greater coherence or systematicity could be achieved by rejecting it. (113)

McMahan holds that we should interpret reflective equilibrium has assuming a sort of modest foundationalism, and thus many of our input commitments have considerable conservative pull.[15]

A second argument that reflective equilibrium need not be committed to fit turns on the *dynamic* nature of reflective equilibrium. Even if reflective equilibrium forbids *immediate* radical change (at any particular point in the process, reflective equilibrium requires maintenance of the vast body of

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[14] Elgin (2017) also argues that reflective equilibrium is not committed to coherentism.

[15] Similarly, Cath (2016) argues that coherence cannot provide justification without our judgements having some initial credibility: "increasing the coherence of one's beliefs can only 'amplify' any justification already possessed by one's beliefs, but by itself cannot confer justification on one's beliefs" (11). Norman Daniels describes this objection as "No Justification without Credibility" (268).

one's beliefs), it permits a series of incremental changes that might ultimately yield radical change. The *process* of reflection might lead us far away from our starting points.

However, this second argument also relies on a coherentist interpretation of the epistemology of reflective equilibrium, though less overtly than the first. The ability to (rationally) radically revise our moral beliefs over time depends on the assumption that none of those beliefs hold foundational status. For it requires revision to have no "cost," assuming that we have increased coherence through the revision. If we take our considered moral judgment to possess a (modest) foundational status, then revising them is costly. These costs would add up as the process unfolds, preventing radical revision.

Scanlon's claims about the dynamics of reflective equilibrium may be interpreted in a modest foundationalist manner. For he indicates that, at each step in the process, you cannot just revise *any old way.* You have to revise *on the basis of reflection* about the reasons to revise in one way as opposed to another. Fair enough. However, when we ask *what is that basis,* it might seem that the natural answer is often: some of the initial moral judgment seem more credible than the arguments against them. However, if *this* is the basis for making a choice about revision, then it would seem that we are assuming some brand of foundationalism. And, if this is right, then we cannot assume that substantial revision will be costless.

Stepping back, we see that our initial hypothesis that reflective equilibrium is committed to fit is, on reflection, correct. The reasoning on the basis of which proponents of reflective equilibrium believe they are avoiding commitment to fit is based on implausible epistemic assumptions, and the most plausible way of interpreting many of its proponents' remarks is to see them as committed to epistemic assumptions that entail fit. The basic reason is Moorean: any chain of argument using

reflective equilibrium that arrives at a (radical) philosophical account at odds with our initial considered judgements will be less plausible than our initial "common sense" starting points.[16]

Finally, I should note that even if we adopt a version of reflective equilibrium methodology that is not *committed* to fit, most uses of it will *de facto* aim to conform to fit. As McMahan says, it is not *likely* that reflective equilibrium will lead to radical revision of our moral beliefs. There are a number of reasons why the method employs fit *de facto*. First, the considered judgments that serve as the starting point for reflection (our intuitions) are typically shaped by the assumptions embedded in our practices. Second, justifying these starting assumptions to others often depends on a shared acceptance of those assumptions, creating pressure to begin from common ground. Third, revisions to judgments occur only when conflicts arise with other judgments—judgments that are themselves influenced by the same embedded assumptions—and the process of revision tends to favor the least disruptive changes. As a result, argumentation using reflective equilibrium is de facto constrained by the requirement of fit.

Stepping back, the point is that philosophical deliberation is, as a matter of fact, quite constrained by the starting points of our historical situation due to both rational considerations and sociological factors. There are limits on how much one can rationally deviate from historically-given "common sense."

4.3 Why Think Reflective Equilibrium is Committed to Unity?

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[16] As Anil Gupta (2006) has written, "Any theory that would wage war against common sense had better come loaded with some powerful ammunition. Philosophy is incapable of providing such ammunition" (178).

The third claim, that reflective equilibrium methods are committed to unity, is *prima facie* straightforward: the "equilibrium" state is a unified state. Insofar as the method aims at equilibrium, it aims at unity. As Michael DePaul (1987) writes, "Wide reflective equilibrium is the point where a person's considered moral judgements, moral theory, and background philosophical beliefs form a coherent system" (465).

Sometimes it is assumed that the deeper reason for this commitment to unity is epistemic: that coherence is what contributes to the method yielding justification. However, as previously discussed, reflective equilibrium need not be committed to coherentism, and there are reasons that it should not be. Reflective equilibrium is compatible, and might even require, a modest foundationalist epistemology. Such a view is compatible with the end-state of the method being disunified. It might be that we should understand the metaphor of "equilibrium" not as looking for unity, but as looking for a *stable place of reflection*.[17] This might be in disunity.

However, there are distinct reasons why the method is committed to unity that are rooted in the *purposes* of philosophical reflection that employs reflective equilibrium—that it aims at systematic rational understanding. As Brandom (2009) writes, "Philosophers aim at a kind of understanding, not, more narrowly, at a kind of knowledge" (113). In philosophy, we are looking for how things "hang together"—not merely whether particular claims are true. Moreover, we are looking for how things *rationally* hang together; we aim to identify a rational nexus, not merely a causal web, and this rational nexus should be as comprehensive and dense as possible.[18]

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[17] Helen Beebee (2018) characterizes equilibrium in this way: "I take it that at least a very large part of what most individual philosophers do just *is* a matter of trying to find a (partial) point of equilibrium, at which one is happy to—as Lewis puts it—come to rest" (17).

[18] See Hannon and Nguyen 2022, particularly section 3.6.

Achieving systematic rational understanding is not only theoretically valuable but connected to a number of *practical* aims of philosophy. Consider Rawls' (2001) discussion of the four roles for political philosophy in the introduction to *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*.

(1) *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"

(2) *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.

(3) *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

(4) *Reasonable hope*: Show us how the social world allows us to rationally hope for a (realistically) utopia

These four aspirations require that we look for unity among our judgements, as well as among the various institutions and practices of our social world. *Conflict adjudication* requires showing how there are more fundamental principles or assumptions that can reconcile (or at least attenuate the conflict among) ostensibly competing considerations and viewpoints. *Orientation* requires putting on display the interconnections amongst our views in a way that shows them to fit into a cohesive system. *Reconciliation* requires showing that our aspirations are, generally, compatible with one another and compatible with the rough outlines of our social world. And *Reasonable hope* requires that there be

sufficient unity between our (cohesive) aspirations and our social world. It is through *systematic rational understanding* that we are able to use political philosophy to achieve these ends.

Moreover, when combined with a commitment to *Fit,* achieving rational understanding helps us achieve rational *self*-understanding. It helps us make sense of *ourselves* by making sense of our attitudes and the basic institutions of our social world. The idea that philosophy aims at rational self-understanding is a traditional, although not uncontroversial idea. For instance, Brandom (2009) writes that "Philosophy is a reflexive enterprise: understanding is not only the goal of philosophical inquiry, but its topic as well. We are its topic; but it is us specifically as understanding creatures: discursive beings, makers and takers of reasons, seekers and speakers of truth" (114).[19] Brandom describes this outlook as so traditional that "it is liable to seem quaint and old-fashioned" (113). Nevertheless, it is still an animating idea reflected in the practice of contemporary philosophy, even when not usually so baldly expressed.

5. Deconstructive Genealogy as "Counter-Reconciliatory" and "Anti-Noetic"

So far, I have argued that deconstructive genealogy poses a problem for reflective equilibrium methods under certain conditions. This conclusion might seem a bit inward-looking, as if proponents of deconstructive genealogy are overly invested in methodological issues in the profession, as opposed to caring about the world that philosophy should help us understand. It might also make one reasonably wonder why social theorists should care about such issues.

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[19] Similarly, Collingwood claims that "Philosophy is reflective. The philosophizing mind never simply thinks about an object, it always, while thinking about any object, thinks also about its own thought about that object. Philosophy may thus be called thought of the second degree, thought about thought" (*Idea of History*, § 1).

However, as we have seen in the last section, reflective equilibrium is not just a transient methodological trend, like the newest causal inference method in economics. Rather, it reflects (i) the aspiration for systematic rational understanding of (ii) sets of commitments that we cannot rationally go beyond. Deconstructive genealogies are significant because they raise the questions of what to do when this aspiration cannot be met. Moreover, they raise questions about whether systematic rational understanding is invariably a worthy aspiration. For while rational understanding is an important aim, the pursuit for it can have pernicious consequences in certain circumstances, including those that interest social theorists.

First, when seeking systematic rational *self*-understanding (under the constraint of fit to our own judgements and social institutions), there is a risk of engaging in an ideologically objectionable form of apologetics, doggedly looking to provide some rational justification for our views and social world. Recall Rawls' four functions for political philosophy: (1) help adjudicate conflicts, (2) provide "orientation", (3) reconciliation, and (4) provide grounds for reasonable hope for realizing reasonably utopian ideals. A philosophy focused on seeking sources of unity in our judgments and social world is implicitly guided by apologetic goals.[20]

One aim of deconstructive genealogy is to oppose these goals by undercutting the assumptions of philosophical projects that pursue them. It gives us reason to think (1)* conflicts are not likely to be

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[20] Rawls himself is sensitive to these concerns: "The idea of political philosophy as reconciliation must be invoked with care. For political philosophy is always in danger of being used corruptly as a defense of an unjust and unworthy status quo, and thus of being ideological in Marx's sense. From time to time we must ask whether justice as fairness, or any other view, is ideological in this way; and if not, why not? Are the very basic ideas it uses ideological? How can we show they are not?" (Rawls 2001, 4 ft.4)

significantly attenuated, (2)* "orientation" of the kind desired kind is not possible (because there is no worldview embodied by our judgements and practices), (3)* reconciliation, at least of the desired kind, is not possible, and (4)* there is no reasonable hope for realizing utopian ideals. We can say that a philosophy oriented around these aims is a philosophy of *counter-reconciliation*.

A philosophy of counter-reconciliation might sound negative and depressing, and, indeed, this is a conclusion that some philosophers have embraced (e.g. Adorno 1973). Raymond Geuss (2022) describes being attracted to Adorno's "full unabashed defense of negativity" (157), and, like Adorno, tends to be skeptical that it is possible to develop a conception of utopia that escapes the grips of ideology. If this skepticism is justified, then perhaps we should simply avoid utopian thinking. Perhaps, therefore, deconstructive genealogists should be satisfied with a simple negative conclusion: the aspirations thinkers like Rawls cannot be satisfied, and we should not try to develop alternative positive proposals to replace them.

However, this is not the only conclusion that one might draw. Appreciating internal conflicts may be a way of coming to a more positive and productive relationship with them, rather than trying to find a way around them. After all, there is, *ex hypothesi*, little one can do about them. This latter thought might sound "self-help-y" and exactly the opposite of Adorno's insight. However, a number of thinkers influenced by Nietzsche have taken deconstructive genealogy to be a tool for helping us reevaluate our attitudes towards fragmentation and tension. Perhaps fragmentation and disunity should be seen as a rich "polyphony" rather than a mark of disfiguration.[21] Edward Said (1993)

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[21] The view that fragmentation and disunity are positive traits is sometimes ascribed to Nietzsche. For instance, Deleuze (1983) writes that "[t]he sense of Nietzsche's philosophy is that multiplicity, becoming and chance are objects of pure affirmation" (197).

analogizes complex forms of cultural fragmentation and tension to an "atonal ensemble" (318), which has its own aesthetic merits. Cultures need not be unified classical symphonies.[22]

Note that on such a view, the problem with philosophical projects oriented towards classic reconciliation and orientation is not that they reconcile you to a social world that doesn't merit reconciliation. It is rather that they might make you less attentive to life's charming disharmonies and dramatic conflicts in the service of pressing everything into a straightjacket of bland unity. Consider what kind of biographies we want to read: those of the pleasant, consistent and unobjectionable, or those of the wild and conflicted? Ironically, deconstructive genealogy might enable us to better *appreciate* (and thereby reconcile ourselves to) the current order, because of rather than despite its internal tensions.[23]

There are parallels to these points when it comes to the pursuit of understanding *others,* which is what is at issue in social thought. First, paralleling the concern with apologetics, pursuing systematic rational understanding of others might legitimate the illegitimate – it might reconcile us to others to whom we should not reconcile. For instance, consider filmmaker Claude Lanzmann's remarks when asked if his film *Shoah* should help us understand the Nazi point of view: "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*" (quoted in Lilla 2013). We should exercise moral caution in trying to make sense of the Nazis.

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[22] Said often uses musical metaphors to describe his approach to criticism and social theory. See Bartine 2015 for discussion.

[23] Moreover, on such views, philosophical projects oriented towards classic reconciliation reconcile you to the social world *for the wrong reasons.* They are like the false consolations offered by religion.

Second, the pursuit of rational understanding might put us in an objectionable relationship to others by encouraging us see them as objects of easy comprehension. Consider Said's discussion of Orientalism. Orientalist scholarship and theory—embedded in social practices, governmental assumptions, and military power—has created the construct of "the Orient" as a kind of unified type of place and person. However, the living *actual* Orient is a much more diverse, dynamic, fragmentary environment that cannot be easily summarized by such a unified construct. Said thinks the attempt to render such a disunified object unified is substantively problematic. However, this is not because such an attempt might fool us into appreciating an object that doesn't merit appreciation. It is rather that seeing that object as overly unified *de*values it.

That is, Said's concern with Orientalism is not just with the content of its objectionable stereotypes—that the Orient is a place of sensuality, unreason, and despotism. It is that 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).[24] Here, I believe, Said is drawing on the common idea that the *ineffable* or *inexhaustible character of the other* that renders the other worthy of appreciation, admiration, or respect.

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[24] In *TI,* Nietzsche writes that "You ask me which of the philosophers' traits are really idiosyncrasies … For example, their lack of an historical sense, their hatred of the very idea of becoming, their Egypticism. They think that they show their respect for a thing when they dehistoricize it, *sub specie aeterni* — when they turn it into a mummy. All that philosophers have handled for thousands of years have been conceptual mummies [Begriffs-Mumien]; nothing real escaped their grasp alive. Whenever these venerable concept-idolators [Begriffs-Götzendiener] revere something, they kill it and stuff it; they threaten the life of everything they worship" (Reason in Philosophy 1). One can think of Said as picking up on this idea of Nietzsche's and applying it to the understanding of others.

This is incompatible with grasping the "definition" of a culture or a person that enables you to comprehend them as a whole.

That is, besides being counter-reconciliatory, deconstructive genealogies are "anti-noetic"—they militate against the pursuit of systematic rational understanding in domains in which it is not appropriate. Of course, deconstructive genealogy is not against understanding *tout court*. It offers causal explanations of why we hold the views we do and how practices and social institutions came to be established. Yet, it highlights a tension between such causal understanding and the ostensibly "higher" aim of philosophy: not merely *explaining* our views, but "*making sense*" of them. It is this sense-making activity that deconstructive genealogy challenges.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that deconstructive genealogies pose significant challenges to key elements of philosophical methodology and social thought. By revealing the fragmentation and tensions within domains often assumed to be unified, such genealogies undercut assumptions needed for philosophical definitions and reflective equilibrium.

However, deconstructive genealogy is not some universal acid to throw over philosophy. It only applies to phenomena that have histories of the relevant kind, and not everything has a *Herkunft*. This is fortunate since deconstructive genealogy itself requires philosophical assumptions to operate, and those philosophical assumptions must themselves be justified, presumably by the method of reflective equilibrium.

However, for the phenomena to which to it does apply, the implications of deconstructive genealogy are significant. Reflective equilibrium methodology is not just some local disciplinary idiosyncrasy that is easy to give up. It's commitment to vindicating our starting convictions is rooted in deep features of philosophical deliberation—that it is difficult to rationally deliberate ourselves out

of our historical starting points—, and its commitment to trying to unify and systematize those starting

parts is rooted in our deep interests in rationally understanding ourselves and reconciling ourselves to

our social world. Historical accounts that show that our interests in rational understanding and

reconciliation cannot be realized have implications for philosophical methodology but also

significance beyond it.

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TI   *The Twilight of the Idols*. Translated by R. J. Hollingdale (Penguin, 1968)

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