

## **Stirling Conference: Reply to Miranda.**

In her paper Miranda Fricker invokes a genealogical method to provide additional considerations to bolster the anti-sceptical positions of Brandom and Williams.

In this reply I want to spend some time reflecting on the genealogical method and consider whether it has anything to offer which particularly helps us with regard to the sceptic.

1, There are two kinds of genealogy. In the first kind, attention to history brings into view the *contingency* of our conceptual apparatus, its intersections with the workings of power. This is kind of genealogy linked with Foucault and Nietzsche. There seems to be something to be learnt from this kind of genealogy, even with respect to the current project. For it stresses that what counts as knowledge, and what counts as appropriate practices of justification has been variable. Consider the difference between religious knowledge, justified by reference to religious authorities and scientific knowledge justified by certain kinds of scientific practices. What, Foucault suggests, links these, are not some core elements of concepts of 'knowledge' and 'truth', but the honorific status that what counts as knowledge has been given, and the role of its norms in guiding practice.

2. The second kind of genealogy, that which is employed here, is quite the reverse of this. It tells a 'fictional' origin story to show us that certain concepts have some kind of *necessity* in our lives, and to identify *core* aspects to them, aspects which they *must* have. Core aspects of our concept of knowledge are thereby identified via a method distinct from that of analysis. For Miranda this method makes clear that anchoring our conception of knowledge is the notion of a *reliable informant*. The social, responsibility, and contextual nature of knowledge is claimed to be interdependent with this. The sceptic, then, she suggests, tries to employ a concept pruned of aspects which are in fact core to it.

3. One thing that I wonder here is what these origin stories are supposed to offer, which can't be gained by attending to the role that certain concepts play in our *actual* everyday practices, something like the method that Wittgenstein employs? Such

attention makes us aware that there are certain contexts in which requests for justification make sense and others in which it doesn't. It also allows us to see, that accepting certain things as known, is a precondition of raising questions of justification at all; so we have a standard anti-sceptical move in which the sceptics starting point is shown in some way to require at least some of what they then want to call into question.

4. What does a fictional origin story add to this? Williams claims if we look at actual usage we are faced with a complex network of intersecting practices. This is too dense and diverse for us to be able to make explicit the *function* of certain concepts. Origin stories help us do that. Miranda claims that they show that we *must* have concepts of a certain shape. Craig says that they make the having of concepts of a certain shape *intelligible*. These stories are supposed to explain why we have the concepts we do. But it is not so clear what the explanatory force is here. These do not seem to be transcendental claims. They do not seem to be offering us transcendental conditions of possibility for the application of the concept. They rather seem to be invoking broadly empirical explanatory links, anchored in an evolutionary story. The notion of function is, presumably, to be cashed in some kind of evolutionary way. Miranda's remarks also suggest a kind of naturalising explanation. Sceptics would not have survived in the State of Nature. Consequently, Miranda concludes sceptics would have to be inquirers first before being sceptics, and that the first rules out the second. But are such claims convincing if interpreted in this way? Firstly, if they are empirical, why not use real natural history instead of a fiction? Secondly a broadly evolutionary story seems to tell us so little; only that some people need to survive long enough to reproduce. Even if the having of some concepts may seem to promote this, this seems a long way from showing that such concepts are necessary. All that's needed, after all, is that, practically, people did enough to stay alive. The concepts they employ seem to enjoy a considerable autonomy from such material considerations. The natural history, fictional or real, seems to leave a great variety of possibilities open. Finally is it appropriate to treat our concepts as, broadly, natural kinds, whose core elements are to be uncovered by some kind of empirical investigation?

5. But maybe it is a mistake to treat these fictional origin stories as offering broadly naturalising accounts of what is essential to our conceptual apparatus. Maybe their status is *justificatory* rather than causally explanatory. If this was the case then their status would be comparable to that of Rawls' 'original position' in vindicating key components of a just society. But there is a crucial difference between the cases. There is an *a priori* link between Rawls position and key aspects of our concept of justice. The position was a way of capturing the requirement of impartiality, for example, which we could antecedently agree to be core to the concept. But there seems no such links between the State of Nature and our concept of knowledge.

6. It is interesting that Wittgenstein also makes reference to our natural history, in a way that seems to fit neither of the kinds of genealogy signalled so far. Towards the end of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein says: 'If the formation of concepts can be explained by facts of nature, should we not be interested ... in that nature which is the basis of grammar? ... But our interest does not fall back upon those possible causes of the formation of concepts, we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history- since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes.' What then is the point, for him, of the apparent references to natural history? Wittgenstein suggests that it is to show there is a certain kind of contingency to the concepts which we have, 'let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him' But the suggestion also seems to be that certain very general facts of nature, so general that we don't notice or remark on them, give a certain kind of intelligibility to our having the concepts that we do, and this without it being possible to establish causal and law-like links between them. Wittgenstein draws attention to the fact that when we smile at a baby, she smiles back. He remarks 'one wants to say; "No wonder we have this concept in *these* circumstances.'" The natural history, without determining our concepts, seems to provide conditions without which those concepts would not get off the ground. The kind of understanding which Wittgenstein is pointing to here is not, however, a scientifically naturalising one. It is not that we could ground our expressive capacities in material facts from which they could be predicted. Wittgenstein is asking us to imagine a world in which there are material differences, in order to consider that under those circumstances things might have

appeared to us differently, and other forms of life would thereby become comprehensible.

Maybe we can understand the role of origin stories in this way? Their goal would be to draw attention to certain, *actual*, very general facts about human beings. Given these it is unsurprising we have a concept like 'knowledge', unsurprising we have a practice like 'truth telling'. But then it is not clear that we can draw any conclusions about concepts being necessary, or about certain aspects of the concept being core. Again the natural history, fictional or real, seems to leave a great variety of possibilities open.

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