

Vindicating Reasons

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1. *Introduction.* A genealogy would be an historical account of how someone, or some number of people, came to believe or to value the things that they do. What is genealogy for? The question may seem unfair: couldn't genealogy be pursued for its own sake and without ulterior motive? Even if its pursuit serves wider ends, perhaps it serves them by instancing those ends rather than by providing an independently specifiable means to them. If, for example, there is value in knowing, then insofar as genealogical inquiry promises to furnish knowledge, its fruits might instance the wider value of our coming to know. Relatedly, insofar as the activities associated with inquiry are themselves valuable, independently of their resulting in knowing, then the activities associated with genealogical inquiry might instance those values, and that might be so independently of whether those activities also terminated in our acquiring genealogical knowledge. However, even if it were accepted that genealogy can have a value of its own, or can instance what is intrinsically valuable, that need not exclude that it also serves further ends. Let us therefore allow the question.

The difficulty now is that genealogy might serve any of many further ends. My focus here will be on a proposal that has figured significantly in some recent work. According to this proposal, one of genealogy's distinctively philosophical functions is to play a fundamental role in the assessment of the beliefs or values whose appearance it seeks to explain. Through considering specific forms of this proposal to be found in work by Bernard Williams and David Wiggins, my aim will be to suggest some grounds for caution about this function. If genealogy is to play the proposed role in the assessment of beliefs or values, then it must be able to uncover all the reasons there are for believing or valuing. Genealogy is

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restricted, however, to reasons for believing or valuing that are available to one independently of whether one has the beliefs or endorses the values, and there is no reason to think that all the reasons there are for believing or valuing will meet that condition.

We can begin to see the shape of the difficulty by considering a non-philosophical case. During a discussion of what the study of history might teach us about contemporary society, Eric Hobsbawm offers a striking example:

I know of [a]...community in the Central Andes of Peru which has, since the late sixteenth century, consistently been in dispute about the possession of certain lands with the neighbouring haciendas or (since 1969) co-operatives. Generation after generation of illiterate older men took illiterate boys on to the disputed high pastures of the *puna* and showed them the boundaries of the communal land they had then lost. History is here literally the authority for the present. (Hobsbawm 1997: 25.)

The disputed question concerns the status of the target community's standing claim to a certain piece of land. That question seems to turn on further, historical questions—questions concerning, for example, who had legal possession of the land in the late sixteenth century and whether that initial entitlement was preserved or whether it was at some point, or over time, transferred to the neighbouring haciendas. Suppose that a contemporary genealogist took an interest in this dispute. How might they contribute? And what might be the outcome?

Suppose that, as seems possible, the community had initial possession of the land and that no legal transfer has taken place in the meantime. That is, suppose that, were the full facts of the case to be made available to legal assessment, then the outcome would be recognition of the community's current entitlement to the land. Suppose further, as is also possible, that in the late sixteenth century, the community knew of their initial possession and that generation after generation of older members of the community had communicated this knowledge to younger members, together with knowledge that the initial entitlement had been preserved to that point. In that case, current members of the community would know that they are now entitled to possession of the lands. What, in that case, might a genealogist offer them?

A natural thought is that the genealogist might check and, on that basis, confirm (or, as it might have been in other circumstances, disconfirm) the community's views. Significantly, their being in a position to do that would seem to depend on their having modes of access to relevant evidence that was appropriately independent of the community's knowledgeable testimony. It should not be taken for granted that they will have such access. Suppose, however, that they did and that, by

bringing such evidence to light, they were able to confirm the community's view. Given that the community already knows that they are entitled to the land, that wouldn't obviously improve their cognitive position with respect to the fact of their entitlement, although it might conceivably enhance their surety or their understanding of their entitlement's surrounds. However, it might nonetheless help to vindicate their claim in the eyes of relevant legal authorities. That might be so, for example, if the authorities required evidence that was less dependent on the views of either party to the dispute than would be the community's knowledgeable testimony. But if all that now mattered to the community was ensuring that knowledge of a past injustice is preserved—perhaps because they had long since despaired of resuming title to the land—then achieving their own goals would not seem to depend upon genealogical vindication.

Suppose, instead, that we leave open whether the community now knows that they are entitled to the land. They are firmly committed to the view that they are, but that is consistent with their being either right or wrong. Genealogical inquiry might turn up either of those alternatives. Or it might fail to reach a secure conclusion, due, for instance, to the genealogist lacking an appropriately independent mode of access to relevant evidence. The latter outcome would be strictly neutral even with respect to the question whether the community knows that they are entitled to the land. The former outcomes seem to share a special feature: the reason that the genealogical inquiry has potential bearing on the standing of the community's present view is that their present view concerns, or depends for its truth upon, genealogical facts. If what one believes concerns or depends upon facts about the historical path to one's present position, then of course one's belief is open to assessment by appeal to facts uncovered by genealogical inquiry (see Geuss 1994: 276).

Suppose that the genealogist establishes that what the community believes about their entitlement to the land is true. Still, the genealogist might have additional interests. One such interest would be in determining whether the community *knows* that they are entitled to the land. A quick fix at that point would be for the genealogist to tell the community what they have uncovered as to the facts of the case: independently of the community's already knowing that they were entitled to the land, the genealogist's knowledgeable testimony might put them in a position to know it. But we can assume that the genealogist's interest is less practical than that. In that case, they might be concerned to find out whether the chain of communication from older to younger members of the community over generation after generation was of a sort able to transmit knowledge. But again, there can be no guarantee that the genealogist will be positioned to settle that question.

The example illustrates some further ends that might plausibly be served by genealogical inquiry. It also provides a helpful model for further

elaborations of some of the various sorts of ends that genealogy might serve. However, none of those ends seem straightforwardly pertinent to philosophy (except, perhaps, insofar as it involves itself in boundary disputes). As suggested earlier, then, we should try to narrow our opening question. What properly *philosophical* ends might genealogy serve? (For an assortment of recent suggestions about possible such ends, see Koopman 2013; Lorenzini 2020; Queloz 2021; Srinivasan 2019.)

Since I lack a clear conception of the extent of properly philosophical ends, I propose to narrow my focus even further. As noted earlier, one end that some philosophers have suggested for genealogy is that of underwriting a fundamental assessment of beliefs or values by *vindicating* or *subverting* those beliefs or values. Very roughly, the end here is that of revealing whether target beliefs are of good or bad standing. And given the aim of sustaining fundamental assessments—rather than, say, adorning such assessments with subsidiary benefits or costs, as might have happened with the genealogical confirmation of Hobsbawm’s community’s beliefs—it is natural to expect that what genealogy does not vindicate is thereby subverted and *vice versa*.

As mentioned, my aim will be to raise some critical questions about two ways in which that schematic idea has been elaborated, the first due to Williams and the second due to Wiggins. Since my hope is to uncover large-scale, structural features of these positions, my discussion will be somewhat abstract. As will emerge, at least when their respective elaborations of the idea of vindication are considered in this abstract way, the two elaborations can each be read a way that reveals them to share the problematic assumption that was mentioned earlier, that any reasons that one can have for believing or valuing something must be reasons that someone could have had for *coming* to believe or value it. That, anyway, is what I shall suggest.

Williams’ position is outlined in §2; Wiggins’ in §3. The seeming structural commonality is discussed in §4, and suggestions are made there about how each of our targets might respond. I’ll suggest that the most natural ways for each of them to respond would undercut the ability of genealogy to sustain tests for the goodness or badness of target beliefs or values that are bound to be available to one who doesn’t already hold the beliefs or endorse the values. (For brevity and focus, I shall mostly drop the disjunct, ‘or valuing,’ and its cognates; I intend what I say, or simple developments thereof, to apply to either case.)

2. *Williams*. The idea of a vindicatory genealogy arises at two main points in Williams’ work. The first of these points concerns the conditions under which genealogy, or history more generally, is relevant to internal disciplinary aims. Here, a natural challenge arises from what Williams characterises as the standard view of science, according to which the

history of a science may be of independent interest but has no role to play in advancing the discipline-internal aims of the science. Thus, Williams writes:

Of course, scientific concepts have a history: but on the standard view, though the history of physics may be interesting, it has no effect on the understanding of physics itself. It is merely part of the history of discovery. (Williams 2000: 189)

At least according to this standard view, a genealogical account might tell us something about how we came to make certain scientific discoveries—that is, about how we came to believe or to know some of the things we now believe or know. However, it does not figure in the justification, or the wider assessment, of our properly scientific beliefs. It does not play an essential role in establishing whether we know any of the things that we believe. The standard view, then, has two parts. The first part is a conditional, to the effect that if genealogy can provide only a history of discovery with respect to the claims made within some discipline and cannot figure, in addition, in providing a justification for those disciplinary claims or their denials, then genealogy cannot serve the internal ends of that discipline. The second part of the standard view has it that scientific disciplines—specifically, physics—meet the antecedent condition. With respect to scientific disciplines, then, genealogy can make no discipline-internal contribution.

As Williams points out, however, the standard view requires supplementation with an account of what it is for genealogy to be restricted in this way to providing only a history of discovery and making no further contribution to the assessment of disciplinary claims. A first approach to this question focuses on the idea of discovery. If what is discovered is known, then establishing that a discovery has taken place is discovering that something has come to be known. But if something has come to be known, then, with respect to what is known, the question of justification has already been answered. In that case, genealogy might figure in explaining how it came to be known—that is, it might figure in a history of discovery—but has no further work to do in determining whether it amounts to a discovery, something that is now known.

However, if we think about the question in those terms, then it would be natural to wonder whether an important question hasn't been begged. This approach to the question simply assumes that what we have in view is a discovery and that genealogy enters only at a point after which that has been accepted. It therefore leaves open that genealogy might figure at an earlier point, in helping to establish whether a putative finding is in fact a discovery.

If we are to make progress, then, what is needed is an account of what it is, with respect to a given discipline, for a discovery to be made

within that discipline. That is, what we require is an account of what it is for a claim made within the discipline to express knowledge. With such an account in hand, we would be positioned to discern whether genealogy has a role to play in establishing the standing of claims within the discipline. One possible outcome would be that the assessment of claims within a given discipline is determined entirely by discipline-internal standards. In that case, insofar as the discipline-internal standards of, say, physics apply independently of genealogical information, genealogy would be irrelevant to the assessment of claims made within physics. With respect to claims made within such a discipline, genealogy might be revealing about the history of their coming to be made and about how that history reveals them to meet discipline-internal standards of assessment but would tell us nothing further about the standing of those claims.

Williams' own proposal about what it is for genealogy to be limited to providing at most a history of discovery is contained in the following passage:

There is of course a real question of what it is for a history to be a history of discovery. One condition of its being so lies in a familiar idea, which I would like to put like this: the later theory, or (more generally) outlook, makes sense of itself, and of the earlier outlook, and of the transition from the earlier to the later, in such terms that both parties (the holders of the earlier outlook, and the holders of the later) have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement. I shall call an explanation which satisfies this condition *vindicatory*. (Williams 2000: 189)

Williams' proposal differs from our sketch at three main points. First, our sketch focused on a standing property of a disciplinary belief—specifically, on whether the belief reflects knowledge—whilst Williams focuses on the status of a transition between a belief held at a particular point in history and earlier beliefs. This first difference is superficial. It would disappear if we amended the sketch so that it attended to whether a transition between earlier and later beliefs amounted to a transition from ignorance to knowledge. Second, Williams focuses not on the question whether the transition between earlier and later beliefs is from those that reflect ignorance to those that reflect knowledge, but rather on the question whether it effects a transition from worse to better. He thus leaves open the specific required standing of outcome beliefs. Third, and potentially most significantly, on Williams' proposal, the way in which the question whether later beliefs improve on earlier ones is relativised to features that are common to holders of the earlier and later beliefs—namely, what *both* constituencies have reason to recognize as to whether the transition is an improvement. In particular, and unlike the sketch, a transition between beliefs amounts to a discovery on Williams'

proposal only if holders of the earlier belief have reason to recognise the outcome of the transition as an improvement.

The extent to which the third difference between Williams' proposal and the sketch is significant depends on further elements of his proposal. If it is true that one who knows has reason to hold a belief that reflects their knowledge, then it will be a consequence of the sketch that those who make a discovery—the holders of the later belief—have reasons to hold their new belief. And if it also true that where someone has a reason, anyone else can also have that reason, then it will follow that the holders of the earlier belief can have the same reason to hold the new belief. Similarly, if it is true that holders of the later belief have reason to recognize the transition from earlier to later beliefs as an improvement, and if it is true that where someone has a reason, anyone else can have it too, then it will be true that holders of the earlier belief can also have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement. Thus, there can be versions of Williams' proposal which would tend to nullify the third difference. However, the fact that Williams makes explicit the demand that not only the holders of the later view but also the holders of the earlier view must have the target reasons suggests that, on his view, the requirement is not redundant. It therefore suggests that Williams wants to allow that the holders of the later view might have reason to recognize the transition as an improvement even though the holders of the earlier view do not have such reason. That in turn suggests that Williams accepts a view of what it is for someone to have reason to recognize something that is more restrictive than the difference-nullifying view according to which whenever someone has a reason, everyone else has it too. (That suggestion is confirmed in some of Williams' more explicit discussions of reasons and their possession, e.g. Williams 1980.)

Williams' restrictive view of what it takes for someone to have reasons is at work in his discussion of ways in which transitions from one moral or political position to another can fail to amount to discoveries, and so can fail to be amenable to vindicatory explanation:

If we consider how these [liberal] forms of argument came to prevail, we can indeed see them as having won, but not necessarily as having won an argument. For liberal ideas to have won an argument, the representatives of the *ancien regime* would have had to have shared with the nascent liberals a conception of something that the argument was about, and not just in the obvious sense that it was about the way to live or the way to order society. They would have to agree that there was some aim, of reason or freedom or whatever, which liberal ideas serve better or of which they were a better expression, and there is not much reason, with a change as radical as this, to think that they did agree about this, at least until late in the process. If in this sense the liberals did not win an argument, then the explanations of how liberalism came to prevail—that

is to say, among other things, how these came to be our ideas—are not vindicatory. (Williams 2000: 190–191)

The central idea here is that holders of the earlier beliefs—representatives of the *ancien regime*—had no reason to endorse the later, liberal beliefs. The operative test for their having such reasons is that those reasons could have figured in an argument that could have convinced or compelled the holders of the earlier beliefs to shift to the later beliefs. Williams suggests, in turn, that they would be susceptible to being convinced or compelled by such an argument only if they already had, in advance of the transition, an aim that was served better by the later beliefs than the earlier. Where that is not so, the transition from an earlier to a later belief is not sustained by reasons that are possessed by holders of the earlier belief, at least in advance of their making the transition. In that case, Williams suggests, the transition from earlier to later beliefs cannot be explained by appeal to the participants' reasons. There may be reasons *why* the participants make the transition but cannot be reasons *for which* they make it. In that case, his thought seems to be, the transition to the later form of view cannot amount to a discovery—even in Williams' comparatively weak sense, on which recognizable improvement suffices for discovery—and its explanation cannot be vindicatory. (See again Williams 1980.)

As we've seen, Williams' distinction between vindicatory and non-vindicatory explanations turns on whether participants in a transition have reasons for taking it to deliver improvement. However, the official purpose of the distinction is not to rank transitions or outcomes. Rather, the official purpose of the distinction is to mark out those cases with respect to which genealogy, or history more generally, has a role to play in the assessment of target beliefs. According to the official purpose of the distinction, then, a belief for which there is a vindicatory explanation need not be superior to a belief for which no such explanation is available. Rather, a vindicated belief will be distinguished only in that its assessment turns on discipline-internal standards or reasons that could have figured as reasons for which the transition to having that belief was made. The crucial contrast is not with inferior transitions but rather with transitions whose assessment depends on considerations that may not be available to participants as reasons for making those transitions. And on the face of it, that is the right result. For an outcome belief might be a discovery, or anyway superior to earlier beliefs, even if those adopting the belief had no reasons in advance of its adoption for taking it to be so. From that perspective, there seems to be no obvious reason why vindication, as Williams understands it, should correlate with a distinctive degree of confidence or conviction.

That seems to fit the official purpose of Williams' distinction. However, it might be thought that Williams' presentation of that official

purpose must be ironic. For his proposal might seem to be that genealogy is required to establish whether genealogy figures essentially in the assessment of some beliefs, and that might seem to entail that genealogy does figure essentially. (See e.g. Queloz 2017: 137–138.) But however natural that thought might be, it involves a mistake. Insofar as genealogy reveals that a transition amounted to a discovery, it reveals that the transition met discipline-internal standards or was otherwise sustained by participants' reasons. But in that case, it was the transition's meeting those standards or its being sustained by those reasons that constituted its being a discovery. The error here would be akin to that of holding that epistemology plays an essential role in assessing intra-disciplinary beliefs in physics simply because epistemology can figure in establishing whether those beliefs reflect knowledge. It is the error of taking it to be a necessary condition for establishing that p that one establishes that one has established that p . In any case, even if accepted, the ironic reading of Williams' proposal leaves intact the message that the unavailability of a vindicatory explanation need not carry negative consequences for the standing of a transition or its outcome belief.

The first point in Williams' work at which the idea of vindicatory explanation figures, then, seems to be concerned with whether genealogy has any role to play in the assessment of beliefs rather than itself amounting to an assessment of those beliefs. By contrast, at the second point at which the idea figures, it seems to do so as a form of assessment:

If one looks at what might be called the common interest in justice, as opposed to a Platonic idealization of that interest, an account in the Humean style need not represent justice in terms that fall too far short of what people expect of it. One might, that is to say, accept Hume's account (understand justice in terms of that genealogical story) and still give justice, its motivations and reasons for action, much the same respect as one did before one encountered the explanation—or perhaps more respect, if one had suspected that justice had to be a Platonically other-worldly idea if it was anything. In such a case, one may say that the genealogical explanation is *vindicatory*. (Williams 2002: 36)

Williams continues in a footnote:

This term has been used in significantly different, though related, ways. David Wiggins...has used the phrase “vindicatory explanation” for an explanation of the belief that P (in particular, of convergence on the belief that P) which involves its being true that P . My use of it here, and also in Williams (2000), is broader. The question is whether a genealogical explanation of an outlook or set of values is such, when it comes to be understood, as to strengthen or weaken one's confidence in them. (Williams 2002: 283fn.19)

At this second point, Williams treats a genealogical explanation of an idea, outlook, or set of values that is vindicatory as furnishing—or more accurately as *reflecting*—a positive assessment of that idea, outlook, or set of values. His proposal here is that a genealogical explanation is vindicatory to the extent that coming to understand that explanation is not apt to lower one's prior confidence in its target. Despite Williams' breezy suggestion of continuity between this proposal and the one we discerned at the first point (the one we found in Williams 2000) it is natural to wonder about the extent to which the two proposals are aligned.

If the two proposals are aligned, then it must be that the features of a genealogical explanation that figure in the second proposal—the features to which degrees of confidence are sensitive—are the same features that figured in the first proposal as distinguishing explanations that are vindicatory from those that aren't. As we saw, the main features that are operative in the first proposal are whatever reasons are had by the holders of the earlier belief and that support the later belief, at least to the extent of indicating that it improves on the earlier belief. Where a genealogical explanation reveals that the holders of the earlier belief had reasons for accepting that the later belief improves on the earlier one, the genealogical explanation is vindicatory. Where the genealogical explanation does not reveal that, it is not vindicatory. If the second proposal is to mark the same distinction as the first, then it seems that confidence must be sensitive to the same features. Thus, it must be that a genealogical explanation that reveals that one's present belief is supported by reasons that were possessed by holders of an earlier belief is apt to preserve confidence. And it must be that knowledge of a genealogical explanation that fails to reveal that—that is, by revealing that one's present belief is not supported by reasons that were possessed by holders of an earlier belief—is apt to lower confidence. Is there any reason to expect the required coincidence to obtain between one's own confidence in a belief and one's knowledge of the possession of reasons for adopting that belief by those who didn't, or don't, presently have it?

Here is a natural line of thought according to which there would be a reason for the target expectation. We are considering transitions between beliefs, shifts from earlier beliefs to later ones. And we are asking whether those transitions are sustained by reasons. If such a transition is to be sustained by reasons, then it is natural to think that those reasons must operate before the transition occurs. For if they operated only at the point of the transition, or only after the transition, then the transition would already have taken place by the time the reasons operated. And in that case, it is difficult to see how the reasons could have figured in bringing about the transition, and so in sustaining its occurrence. It seems to follow that if the holders of the earlier belief had no reasons for effecting the transition, then there were no reasons

for effecting it. The transition from earlier to later beliefs was not sustained by reasons. At best, it was sustained only by causes, of a sort apt to be uncovered in a genealogical explanation. And it would surely be appropriate to react to the discovery that the transition from earlier to later beliefs was a result of the operations of mere causes rather than reasons by lowering one's confidence in the later belief. (It will be apparent that this outcome conflicts with the earlier suggestion that acknowledging the fact that the transition to a belief was not, in Williams' special sense, a discovery would not automatically ground a lowering of confidence in that belief. We will have cause to return to the tension between that suggestion and the present one.)

3. *Wiggins*. As Williams notes in a passage that was quoted above (TT: 283fn.19), *Wiggins'* offers what is, in some ways, a narrower account of vindicatory explanations. *Wiggins* agrees with Williams that one central target of such explanations is the transition between beliefs or, more generally, the transition from not holding a given belief to holding it. But *Wiggins* differs from Williams in being concerned not merely with the conditions in which such a transition would amount to an improvement in cognitive position, but in addition with the more exigent conditions in which the transition would be one from ignorance to knowledge. *Wiggins'* distinctive focus on the transition from ignorance to knowledge is conditioned, in turn, by his aim of advancing the issue between cognitivist, or objectivist, and non-cognitivist, or non-objectivist, treatments of moral beliefs, and so—as he sets out this issue—assessing the extent to which moral beliefs can reflect knowledge. These points of similarity with, and difference from, Williams are reflected in each of the following three passages:

...the cognitivist will want to insist upon the special importance of explanations that explain moral subjects' beliefs by vindicating their judgments—explanations that explain these subjects' arrival at an opinion by showing that this was the only opinion that would survive reflection. (*Wiggins* 1991b: 354)

Vindicatory explanations at once justify a belief, as the only belief that is open to one who understands what is at issue, and also, by reference to that, explain the belief's coming into being. (*Wiggins* 1996b: 283fn.52.)

Let us call such explanations for the existence of a belief *vindicatory explanations* of the belief. On their basis we see the belief as coming into being precisely because there is no real alternative. By the same token, ethical objectivism will be committed (simply by virtue of its commitment to the possibility of truth in ethics) to saying that an ethical subject matter, no less than perceptual or arithmetical subject matters, will admit

vindictory explanations of (at least some) moral beliefs. (Wiggins 2006: 366.)

Focusing on the point of apparent agreement between Wiggins and Williams, the passages from Wiggins can naturally be read as sharing Williams' view that a vindictory explanation of a belief will explain how someone came to have that belief in such a way as also to justify their having it. (As we shall see in the following section, that is not the only way, and plausibly not the best way, of reading the passages.) On this reading of Wiggins, the shared thought would be that such an explanation will appeal to reasons or grounds that were had by the believer in advance of their forming the belief and which made it reasonable (Williams) or mandatory (Wiggins) for them to form the belief. A genealogy is an historical account that seeks to explain how a belief came to be had. The present proposal is that such an account will be vindictory just to the extent that it explains the formation of a belief in a way that reveals it to have come about on the bases of reasons that the believer had in advance. Where no such account is available, that will lead to either a reduction in confidence in the target belief (Williams) or an inability to see that the target belief reflects knowledge (Wiggins). (For more detail about Williams' and Wiggins' own takes on the relations between their positions, see Williams 1996; Wiggins 1996a; Wiggins 2006: 367–369.)

According to the present proposal, if an explanation of the formation of a belief is to be vindictory, then it must appeal to reasons that were had by the believer in advance of forming the belief. Further, it seems to be required that the reasons could have figured in explaining the formation of the belief. Even if the believer could have had the reasons in advance of their figuring amongst the believer's beliefs, they could play the required role in explaining the formation of the target belief only if they were believed. It follows that they can play this role only if they can be believed in advance of the target belief's being formed. In order, then, for there to be a vindictory explanation of a given belief, there must be reasons for holding the belief that someone could have believed in advance of their forming the target belief. Vindicated beliefs must be based on reasons supplied to one by distinct beliefs, beliefs that one could have had in advance of coming to have the vindicated beliefs.

The question naturally arises whether there is an additional requirement on vindictory explanations, to the effect that a belief is fully susceptible to such an explanation only if any beliefs on which its explanation depends are also susceptible to vindictory explanation. That is, it is natural to wonder whether the possibility of forming a given belief on the bases of reasons supplied to one by distinct beliefs can amount to a full vindication of that belief unless the distinct beliefs on which it depends can also be vindicated.

Fairly obviously, the question presents the proponent of vindication with a dilemma. On the first horn, the requirement that each belief be sustained by distinct beliefs is regressive, and so leads to the conclusion that no belief can be fully vindicated. It leads, that is, to the result that vindication is always at best partial. On the second horn, if we drop the requirement that each belief in the required chain of beliefs must be susceptible to vindicatory explanation, then we seem to be forced to admit that a belief can be in good standing—sufficiently good standing, that is, to serve in vindicatory explanations of other beliefs—even though it is not itself capable of vindication. There must be some beliefs the holding of which cannot be explained by appeal to reasons that are available to be believed in advance of their formation. And yet, recognition that a belief has that property, or that a belief depends on beliefs with that property, need not either lead one to lower one’s confidence in the belief (Williams) or leave it open whether the belief reflects knowledge (Wiggins). (O’Neill 1992 is relevant here, especially: 280–281.)

An account of full vindication, or a full account of vindication, must therefore go beyond an account of those beliefs that are vindicated through reasons that are available in advance of their formation. What is wanted, in addition to an account of a belief’s being vindicated through earlier beliefs, is an account of the standing of beliefs that can serve as the starting points for, rather than as the end points of, vindicatory explanations. Do either Williams or Wiggins have available to them resources that are able to sponsor such an account? (That this is not merely an idle meta-theoretical issue can be seen from ongoing disputes over the proper starting points for genealogical accounts of knowledge as in Craig 1999: can our concept of knowledge or our valuing knowledge figure as the end point of a genealogical story or should it figure, instead, as a starting point? See here Williamson 2000: 31 fn.3; Walker ms and references contained therein.)

4. Starting Points. What we are looking for is an account of what it is for a belief to be vindicated, or to be apt to serve in vindication, that does not depend on there being an account of the belief’s being formed in the light of reasons that were available to be believed in advance of forming the belief. Let’s begin with the question whether such an account is available to Williams; and, if it is, what form it is liable to take.

Williams’ official focus on the availability of reasons to those who don’t hold a target belief, and his emphasis on the role of such reasons in arguments that favour the target belief over alternatives, both suggest the following idea. Vindication of a belief by appeal to reasons that are available independently of that belief is required wherever someone might fail to hold the belief. Wherever it is possible for someone to fail

to hold the belief, there can be a good question about what might induce them to move from that position to one in which they hold the belief. That question is addressed by a genealogical account. And the answer provided by such an account will be vindictory, on Williams' account, just in case, first, it appeals to reasons for forming the belief and, second, someone's believing those reasons could figure appropriately in their taking up the target belief. If that is right, then the regress of vindication will be stopped by beliefs with respect to which it cannot be a good question what might have induced someone to make the transition from not having to having those beliefs. And that seems to require appeal to beliefs that people could not have failed to have. (That this approximates Williams' view is suggested by his sometimes appealing to the idea of basic need as the content or source of genealogical starting points. See e.g. Williams 2002: 90–93.)

We might wonder whether universality of that sort can be either necessary or sufficient for vindication. It will seem insufficient insofar as we are willing to allow that our inability not to believe something does not suffice for the truth of what is believed (or, we might add, for its consistency with other things we cannot help believing). And it will seem unnecessary insofar as we are willing to allow that there can be contingent cases of basic knowledge: cases in which one comes contingently to know something without deriving that knowledge from what one knew or believed in advance. (See here McDowell 1995.) More generally, we might reasonably hold that insofar as universality is a mark of the good standing of a belief, that is so only insofar as universality is correlated with a more basic connection between the explanation of why the belief is held and its likelihood of being true or reflecting knowledge.

That thought returns us to Wiggins' proposal. Thus far, we have been reading Wiggins' proposal as a variant of Williams'. The thought was that the form of explanation of belief to which Wiggins' proposal appeals would meet two requirements: first, it would be an explanation of why a belief came to be formed, and so must make use only of materials that are available in advance of the formation of the belief; and second, it would be an explanation that is also a justification, and so must make use only of materials that could be someone's reasons for holding the belief. It is the forced combination of those two requirements that brought about the present difficulty. Given the second requirement, any vindictory explanation of a target belief is restricted to elements that can be believed or known by the believer. And given the first requirement, it must be possible for those elements to be believed or known by the believer in advance of their coming to hold the target belief. For reasons we have already discussed, it follows that when vindication is so construed, there must be beliefs that cannot be vindicated. However, although the various versions of Wiggins' proposal that we have considered mention both the need to explain the formation

of belief and the justification of belief, they don't make explicit that those two elements are connected in the way proposed by our reconstruction.

An alternative reading of Wiggins' proposal is therefore available that separates what figures in the explanation of the formation of belief from the reasons that support the outcome belief. On that alternative reading, Wiggins would allow that the explanation of the belief can include elements that could not be believed in advance of forming the outcome belief—something that is anyway forced by Wiggins' requirement that one who can understand a vindictory explanation for a given belief must themselves share the belief (Wiggins 1991a: 151). And he would allow that a belief can be adequately supported by reasons that could not be believed in advance of having formed the belief—for example, that the belief that p can be adequately supported by the (known) fact that p .

If the view presented by this alternative reading of Wiggins is defensible, then it can help to explain the error in the line of argument considered at the end of §2, according to which a vindictory explanation of a given belief would have to appeal to reasons for making the transition from not having the belief to having it. The error committed by that line of thought was to assume that any reason for having a belief would have to also be a reason for forming the belief in the first place. Put another way, the error is one committed by our initial reading of Wiggins. The error is to conclude, from the premises that a vindictory explanation will explain how a belief came to be formed and that it will show how the outcome belief is supported by reasons, that the same explanatory elements must play both roles.

5. Conclusion. We have been considering, in the abstract, two proposals about how genealogical explanations might figure in the vindictory assessment of disciplinary beliefs. The first, deriving from Bernard Williams, has it that a vindictory assessment of a belief that is not held universally depends on the availability of a genealogical explanation that reveals how reasons available in advance of forming the belief could have figured as reasons for one to form the belief. We raised two challenges for that proposal. First, it is not clear why either universality or its absence should matter to the standing of a belief. Second, the proposal treats as obligatory an optional assumption, that where a belief is supported by reasons, it must be possible to believe those reasons in advance of forming the belief. The second proposal, which we derived from our second reading of some passages from David Wiggins, sheds the second assumption. Dropping that assumption opens the way to accounting for the good standing of a belief by appeal to reasons that are available only to one who already holds the belief.

If the second proposal were accepted, then genealogy might still have a role to play in the assessment of beliefs, by way of its explanations of the formation of those beliefs. For according to the second proposal, a belief will be vindicated only if the way it is formed means that it is adequately supported by reasons. But there can be no assumption that such explanations are bound to be available to one independently of whether they hold the target belief. And so, it cannot be taken for granted that one's inability to furnish such an explanation is subversive of the target belief. Furthermore, insofar as the genealogical account reveals that a target belief is sustained by reasons, it is its being so sustained that most fundamentally underwrites its assessment, rather than its being further vindicated by the discovery that it is so sustained.

Where does all that leave us with respect to our opening question about the function of genealogy? It focuses attention on something that was highlighted during our discussion of Hobsbawm's example: the genealogist should not assume that all the facts that are relevant to the assessment of a given belief will be available to them independently of their holding, or coming to hold, the target belief. It should not be taken for granted that genealogy can furnish neutral starting points for the assessment of beliefs or that vindicating reasons must be available to those who don't already hold the beliefs. Specifically, it should not be assumed that a belief that genealogy does not vindicate is thereby subverted. That result is compatible with genealogy's retaining a characteristically philosophical employment, but perhaps only a secondary one. Where we already have reasons for believing or valuing, genealogy might, for instance, amplify those reasons or reveal them to be in tension with other reasons. What it cannot do is to provide a fundamental means of assessing what we believe or value.

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