

## A Philosopher's Response: "What is Genealogy?"

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*This article is part of a series of responses to Episode 2.3 of the Genealogies of Modernity podcast.*

Ryan McDermott poses two overarching questions in episode three of the *Genealogies of Modernity* podcast: What is genealogy and how might it better inform how we think of the past today? Four logically interlocking claims shape his argument: 1. Traumatic events of the past produce ripple-like effects in the space-time continuum; 2. These ripples impact all facets of human life in ways analogous to genealogical relationships; 3. These effects dissipate over time but, for those affected by the African slave trade, have remained to the present day; and 4. The original traumatic events can and should be reenumerated for the good of society today.

The main assumption of the documentary is that contemporary thinkers either (A) cover over traumatic stories and their negative effects in favor of idyllic stories and their positive effects or (B) prematurely proclaim that progress has superseded the need to talk about and deal with these stories. The motive behind idyllic storytelling, thinks McDermott, is a covert attempt to hide unsavory stories of the past and mask the resulting trauma. This motive may be intentional or the result of a suppressed psychology. McDermott's suspicion is that it is a thinly veiled bid to favor what Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault call "stories told by the winners."

My main question for McDermott is why the problem of Hegelian moral progressivism, which he identifies as the philosophy giving rise to idyllic storytelling, is challenged by the existentialism of Friedrich Nietzsche rather than that of Soren Kierkegaard? Kierkegaard is the thinker that overcomes the systemic optimism of Hegel with meaning and morality actualized by personal commitment to truth, goodness, and beauty. These are themes that lift people out of their rootedness in an oppressive past and turns them into authentic and mature agents. In other words, instead of utilizing the left-wing Hegelian thread of philosophies extending from Nietzsche to Foucault, why not choose the line extending from Kierkegaard to Dietrich Bonhoeffer? It is here that you find the philosophical resources to own the wrongs and rights of the past, bring creative solutions to the present, and learn to live in loving community.

I will summarize this response with four specific commendations and concerns regarding Episode Three:

### Commendations

1. Revisiting the past pro and con in order to benefit the present is a good thing. Recounting the stories of the GT 272 and the new citizens of Sierra Leone helps us process where we have been, where we are, and where we want to go. This is a noble endeavor worthy of our attention.
2. The literal use of genealogy, especially in the Sierra Leone cases, provides helpful a tool to uncover our past, provide a sense of wholeness in the present, and look forward to a new future. Alondra Nelson's use of genetics to help Isaiah Washington and Thomalind Martin Polite to discover their common heritage was inspiring. This creative redeployment of genealogy serves to establish the roots of those severed by the trauma of the slave trade or other historic injustices.
3. Genealogy is at its best when performed creatively as the effort to view the past with realistic eyes in order to reveal positive potential in the present. If it is coupled with a healthy respect for meaning and morality, it has much to offer in this regard. Such an approach promises to conduct a search of the past to yield new stories and new insights for the present, thereby reconciling relationships and reimagining a future of respect and togetherness.
4. Genealogy has an uncovering and clarifying function that resists forgetfulness and oversight. It celebrates the marginalized by its consistent effort to pull the marginalized into the mainstream. It is maximally empathetic and focuses on ideas in the service of feelings.

#### Contentions

1. McDermott suggests that Modernity is the realization that "we will always to be haunted by the past." However, this is the very thing that Moderns in the philosophical sense deny. "Dare to your use your own reason!" is the battle cry of the Enlightenment. Modernity is about liberation from the chains of dogma in order to become mature humans. This project appears to defend the view that immaturity is inevitable and that embracing our imprisonment is the only way to truly heal.
2. The move from the literal to the analogical use of genealogy is uneven. Literal genealogy establishes the noble origins of people without knowledge of these origins to promote human flourishing. Analogical genealogy unearths unsavory stories (not noble stories) from the past so that we might dwell on them. This unevenness makes the analogical approach tenuous. Creative deployments of genealogy make sense but using them for "critical genealogy" appears suspect. The former helps people and repairs communities with a spirit of togetherness, while the latter could be deemed a Nietzschean powerplay to pressure others to give up their possessions.
3. The specific use of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy is worrisome. After Hegel, existentialism goes two ways—one toward truth as subjectivity (Kierkegaard) and the other toward truth as power (Nietzsche). The former provides a pathway to ownership of truth to yield meaning, morality, and maturity. The latter is merely a

*via negativa*. It unmask abuses of power and their excesses but has nothing to replace them, except the will of superhumans who derive meaning and morality from more sophisticated uses of power.

4. Foucault is a postmodern master. His analysis of the structures of language and the ways in which words conceal structures of power is a helpful contribution to contemporary thought. However, to such a hammer, everything looks like a nail. Power is real and abuses of power are pervasive. But power in the service of truth and goodness, love and justice, is a beautiful thing, and even more pervasive. Foucault-like positions use logic and ethics to be suspicious of logic and ethics, and in so doing they disavow and dismiss all such metaphysical matters. Despite what Nietzsche and Foucault maintain, some trains of thought and modes of behavior are indeed insane.

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