I am exceedingly grateful to John Doris, Josh Gert and Valerie Tiberius for their gracious, thoughtful and penetrating commentaries. They have each brought out aspects of The Emotional Construction of Morals (ECM) that are both core to the project and in need of further elaboration and defence. Or, better than ‘defence’, I should say discussion, since I take many of these issues to be unsettled. Also, the commentaries are refreshingly constructive. In a limited space, they manage to advance substantive theses about the nature of morality. These are not book reviews; they are significant contributions to the literature. Tiberius stakes out a subtle strategy for rendering relativism irrelevant. Gert offers a rosy new way of viewing the analogy between morals and secondary qualities. Doris crafts an innovative story about why history should matter to moralists. In my replies, I offer some reasons for upholding the perspective charted out in ECM, but my thinking about all of these issues has been deepened by the exchange.

1. Does relativism matter?

Of all the views I hold in philosophy, none disturbs me more than metaethical relativism. Consequently, I was very happy to read Tiberius say that relativism does not matter, and I find much of what she has to say reassuring. She argues that we can go on with our moral practices, even if relativism is true, and that we can engage in progressive moral criticism and reform. This is an important original suggestion. Most moral philosophers try to refute relativism because they see it as pernicious or, at least, as incompatible with how we operate in the moral domain. Some expressivists have tried to glibly diffuse the threat of moral variation by arguing that, when we encounter people who tolerate what we find immoral, we can still criticise them for being, say selfish and cruel. Tiberius’s strategy bears a superficial...
resemblance to the expressivist move, but it pivots on a more satisfying suggestion. Moral criticism is not merely a matter of blasting out a litany of culturally inculcated thick concepts. There is, on Tiberius’s view, a genuine form of justification at work in moral debate. Thus, while no system of values can have greater claim to truth, on a relativist framework, some are more justified, and this, she suggests, is all we really need to continue ethics as usual.

There is much I find comforting in this line of argument, and Tiberius has convinced me that truth and justification can come apart in important ways. But I think there are still reasons to find relativism unsettling, and I will try to bring those out here. That does not mean that relativism is completely bad news. In ECM, I argue that relativism can promote tolerance and help us decide when to intervene in others’ affairs. Tiberius disagrees. After arguing that relativism does not have the bad implications usually associated with it, she argues that it also does not have these good implications; the truth of relativism leaves moral practice alone. In response, I will try to re-establish my case for relativism’s upside.

Relativism can be characterized as the doctrine that there can be semantically faultless disagreements: when two parties disagree about the truth of some moral claim, they can both be correct. Take, for example, a society that has slavery, but the slaves submit to their role willingly. Perhaps the ancient Western world was like this. It is not that slaves were happy to be slaves; it is just that they did not regard the institution as immoral (compare, a prison inmate may hate prison without feeling the punishment is unjust). If relativism is true, members of such a society are not making an error when they judge that slavery is morally acceptable. This undercuts our ability to criticize such a society. It is true for us that slavery is wrong, but that fact gives us no critical leverage. We cannot accuse people who live in a society with willing slaves of drawing the wrong conclusions from the evidence, and we cannot bring them to our perspective by pointing to any agreed upon set of facts. The standard tools for resolving debates – e.g. debates in science – are unavailable.

Or consider a case closer to home. Many of us feel passionately about our political values, and we are smugly confident that our opponents are guilty of making a mistake. For example, liberals think conservatives are wrong about abortion, and they sometimes make this case by pointing out that conservatives buy into a supernatural theory of personhood that has been refuted by science. Conservatives think liberals are hopelessly naïve when they pour tax money into social programs, because the people served by such programs are accountable for their state of need. But these debates could turn out to be faultless. An atheist conservative could maintain that abortion is wrong because women should play traditional gender roles or because women who get themselves into ‘trouble’ should deal with the consequences rather than taking an easier way out. A liberal who favoured social
programs could believe that people are responsible for their own poverty, but favour welfare programs just because increasing pleasure is better than punishing the lazy. In both cases, liberals and conservatives have different core values: tradition and self-reliance, on the one hand, happiness and choice on the other. Both sides care about all these things, but rank them differently, and no ranking has greater claim to truth.

This may have normative implications. We should abandon many of our debates with political opponents because they are hopeless, condescending and confused. We should give up on the view that we are in possession of the truth and that others are ignorant. We should question the authenticity and superiority of our most deeply held values. Perhaps, we should even advocate systems of government that allow people with very different moral perspectives to thrive in their own communities. This is disorienting because it means others are less bad than we thought, we are less right than we thought, and the desire to let our views become national law may be a overreaching.

Tiberius argues that this line of thought confuses truth and justification. Members of slave states and political opponents may not be making any semantic mistakes, and that makes their views faultless in one sense. But they may be faulty in another sense: their values and actions may be less justified. This possibility emerges when we attend to moral arguments. When criticizing moral opponents, we point out ways in which their values are selfish or imprudent. We argue that our values would lead to greater flourishing for all. We do not care whose values are true; we care which are better for us, and those that deliver on this score are thereby more justified.

I find this very compelling, and it takes some of the horror out of relativism. Some moral criticism is more than a mere re-statement of moral difference; it is an appeal to reasons that can be used to argue for the superiority of certain values. The difficulty I have is that this move does not fully alleviate the initial anxiety. On the Tiberius picture, justification is still a matter of giving reasons, and the reasons given are values (we care about flourishing, selflessness and prudence). On pain of regress, some of these values must be basic. This could work in one of two ways: either some values are foundational, in that they lack justification, or else the whole system must be holistic, in that each value is justified relative to all others, and thus every value is equally basic. Now suppose we encounter someone whose moral judgements differ from ours even though she agrees about the non-moral facts and makes no errors of inference. This can only happen if she differs in her basic values. In that case, our attempt to criticize her by giving reasons may fail. If basic values are foundational, then they are insensitive to reasons. If they are holistic, the best we can do is try to bring out an inconsistency between her values, but there may be no inconsistency. This may be precisely the situation we are in when it comes to the cases I have mentioned: the willing slaves and certain political disputes.
To drive this home, consider an example from Tiberius’s paper. She says that selling an 8-year-old into sexual slavery is wrong because, ‘it is extremely detrimental to her well-being, or a gross violation of her rights, or a wanton act of cruelty and selfishness’. I suspect that these reasons would have little force in a society where child sexual slavery is practiced. They will admit that it is cruel and selfish, but fail to see that as a reason against; for them, children may have no ‘right’ to choose their own destiny, and they may also point out that the child’s misery will bring profit to her family and satisfaction to her clients. Perhaps child sexual slavery nets great flourishing for the majority at the expense of a few. We find the trade off reprehensible, but this may derive from an individualist value system that is not universally shared. The anxiety about relativism is that we are left in dumbfounded silence when we encounter values like this. With Tiberius, I hope that we can find a way to show that such values have some hidden incoherence in value systems that tolerate sexual slavery, but I do not think we can be confident about that in advance. In some cases, at least, our reasons for finding a practice repellent will have absolutely no force for the practitioners. In this respect, morality may be like food taste; you cannot convince the person who hates cilantro that this is a mistake.

Fortunately, I think relativism has a positive side. It promotes tolerance, and it gives us a tool for figuring out when we can intervene in other cultures. But Tiberius rejects both of these claims. She thinks that tolerance and intervention should be justified in the usual way, by appeal to moral values rather than metaethical principles. Consider tolerance first. In ECM, I say that relativism promotes tolerance because once we see that morals are just the result of inculcated emotions, we have less inclination to crusade against our moral opponents. Tiberius notes that this follows only if we care about such metaethical facts; we may not. In particular, we may not consider the presence of sentiments to be justifying in any way, even in our own case. So the fact that people’s sentiments differ from ours may make no difference. What matters is whether their values are bad by the kinds of standards we have been discussing (e.g. whether they promote flourishing). And, we do not need relativism to find a reason for tolerance; we might discover that intolerance reduces flourishing, which is something we value.

Against this, I offer two replies. First, even if we do not, as a matter of fact, care about sentiments, we should, since these are the moral truth-makers. When we discover this fact about metaethics, one common reason for intolerance is undermined, namely the belief that we are in possession of a single true morality. We are prone to the illusion that our convictions track a deeper moral reality, and, ironically, we are prone to this illusion precisely because morality is actually based on sentiments. Those sentiments make us feel our values with such fervent conviction that we mistake them for self-evident truths. Once we realize there is no objective moral reality, we can see that values other than our own have equal claim to truth. If we continue to rely on
our own values to criticize those who do not share these values, we may be in
the grip of illusory objectivism. It is one thing to say that we do not like the
values of others (an expression of preference), and quite another to say that
they ought not have those values (presupposing some degree of objectivity).
Relativism lets us draw this distinction, and, in so doing, we may stop against
those who have values that we happen to despise, and that is the essence of
tolerance.

Second, I have a concern about Tiberius’s claim that we can fully motivate
tolerance by appeal to first-order ends such as flourishing. For one thing, we
might actually have happier lives in a traditional society that suppressed all
forms of variation. For another, the appeal to flourishing has justificatory
force only for those who take this to be more important than, say, the pre-
servation of traditional values. Conservatives who favour tradition over hap-
piness may be unmoved by Tiberius’s argument for tolerance, but their
intolerance is seriously threatened by the metaethical discovery that tradi-
tional values have no special claim to truth.

Turn, finally, to intervention. In ECM I argue that tolerance has limits. If
we see a society whose members willingly do things we abhor, then interven-
tion would impose our values on others, and that would be a mistake: inter-
vention is usually premised on the false belief that our values hold for others
as well. But suppose we find a society whose powerful members are imposing
things on weaker members who do not share their values (e.g. Taliban for-
cing sharia law on secular women). Here I think relativism licenses
intervention.

Tiberius rejects this claim. She argues that the presence of unwilling victims
cannot remove the relativist’s standard reason for tolerance, which she takes
to be the recognition that others’ values are right for them. She correctly
notes that nothing about unwilling victims undermines that recognition,
and thus the relativist has no special resource for criticism in this case. She
also argues that the decision to intervene can be based on a first-order cri-
tique of the aggressors’ values.

In response, let me begin by conceding that the argument in the book was
unclear on this crucial point. I should not have implied that the presence of
unwilling victims undercuts the belief that a group of aggressors’ values are
right for them. Rather, the presence of unwilling victims reveals a flaw in the
aggressors’ beliefs. Normally, people impose their values because they think
that they are in possession of the one true morality, and relativism reveals
that this is a mistake. Moreover, even if the aggressors lack this belief, the
relativist can intervene, because the relativist argument for tolerance is inap-
plicable: in intervening, we are not erroneously projecting our values onto
others, but rather protecting the victims who share our values. Moreover, the
relativist should reject Tiberius’s strategy for justifying intervention. It is not
enough that aggression violates first-order values, for that is also true when
victims are willing. Crucial is the second-order fact that the unwilling victims share our values.

In summary, I continue to think that relativism has normative implications. If relativism is true, we should abandon debates that presuppose some single moral truth, and we should resist the temptation to impose our values on others. We may also find ourselves compelled to tolerate views we find destructive, provided victims are willing, and we may revise our views about when to intervene. Relativism may help us see that our own values are contingent, and that may set us on a path to moral revision. Like Tiberius, I think revision must be done from inside a system of values, and will often look like ordinary ethical practice. But most moral debates treat basic values as fixed points and quibble over how to apply them. Relativism helps us see that basic values are revisable; it rattles our moral confidence and illuminates the path to self-transformation.

2. Can colour objectivism save morality?

Tiberius says metaethical relativism may be true, but she argues that it is irrelevant. Gert gets off the bus earlier. He is willing to accept one of the hypotheses that leads me to relativism, but he denies that relativism follows. In particular, he is willing to accept that moral values refer to secondary qualities. To move from this claim to relativism depends on certain assumptions about what secondary qualities are like. Gert uses his research on colours, the paradigm case of secondary qualities, to challenges these assumptions. Colours, he argues, enjoy a degree of objectivity and provide a model for explaining how morality might be objective as well. In my response, I will raise some questions about colour objectivism, and I will also argue that colours and morals differ in crucial respects, and thus, the resources used in arguing for colour objectivism may be unavailable in the moral case.

Gert begins his rich commentary by trying to block the inference from moral disagreement to the conclusion that morality is not objective. Gert recognizes that there is disagreement about colours. Indeed, he shows in scientific detail that people identify significantly different wavelengths as the purest instances of our colour categories. This has led some authors to be subjectivist relativists about colour, but Gert resist this conclusion. Our colour words do not refer to pure hues, but to broader colour categories. There is considerable disagreement about the best instances of these categories and about their exact borders, but massive agreement about the majority of cases. Everyone agrees that grass is green, and apples are red. This takes the wind out of the relativist’s sails. Colour boundaries are irresolvably vague, but there is consensus about the majority of cases, and this gives us reason to be objectivists.
Likewise for morality. The fact that people disagree about exotic cases, such as cannibalism and incest, does not entail subjectivism or relativism, provided we agree about the majority of cases. Gert offers two explanations of our moral disagreements. First, it is possible that these exotic cases fall in the penumbra of our vague moral predicates. Within the penumbra, there is no fact of the matter which precisification is right, but this does not vitiate the clear cases. Alternatively, it may be that the exotic cases are not even legitimate candidates for moral evaluation, and that our tendency to treat them moralistically results from an illusion. This, we will see, is the story Gert prefers, but his main point about disagreement is that we should not let peripheral disputes distract us from core agreement.

This argument makes two assumptions that I want to challenge. First, it assumes that there is consensus about the majority of cases. This may be true in the colour case, but, in ethics, there is reason for doubt. I think each of our deeply cherished values is rejected by some cultures. There is massive variation in attitudes towards punishment, slavery, property, privacy, social dominance, sex, distributive justice, political organization and treatment of out-groups (e.g. whether we can kill, rape and steal from our neighbours). Far from peripheral, these aspects of variation play a central role in structuring our lives, and are among the most important human values. Variation is not simply disagreement about paradigm cases or the moral periphery. Slavery, for instance, is not a borderline case of immorality for us, nor is public torture or forcing a 12-year-old girl into an arranged marriage.

The second assumption in Gert’s argument is that agreement about the majority of cases would block a slide into subjectivism. I agree that massive agreement can, all else equal, provide evidence for objectivity, but there are other factors to consider. First, the moral relativist, unlike the colour relativist, can explain consensus without appeal to objectivity. Each society must come up with rules that allow social cohesion, and this may tend to promote some commonalties, such as prohibitions against stealing or killing within the in-group. Second, even if agreement were universal, there are other reasons for being a subjectivist. With colours, one reason has to do with metamerism matching; very different wavelengths are experienced in the same way, suggesting that there is no objective feature corresponding to familiar colour categories. With morals, arguments from ‘queerness’ raise questions about what objective property could we possibly be picking up when we see, say, wilful murder as wrong.

Against this last point, Gert might argue that the objectivist need not define moral properties as mysterious mind-independent entities. The term ‘objective’ is sometimes used to designate domains in which there is a single truth, which all people would converge on under ideal conditions. So defined, objective facts can also be subjective, and therefore the moral objectivist need not postulate mysterious mind-independent moral fact. On this meaning
of ‘objective’, the fact that so many people agree about core cases of colour or morals constitutes a kind of objectivity.

This strategy depends on the assumption that people would agree about core moral issues under ideal conditions. But why expect agreement? One answer is that values derive from human nature. It is unsurprising, then, that Gert endorses a qualified form of nativism. He admits that our moral concepts are not innate, but he says we are innately disposed to moralize certain kinds of situations. The analogy, again, is colour. Judging from linguistic variation, we do not have innate colour concepts, but colour space, Gert suggests, is uniform cross-culturally. Thus, when concepts are introduced, they are applied to the same things; one can express the thought that blood is red in English, French, German, Hebrew, Japanese and Russian. Likewise, the universal moral sense may lead us to introduce words for moral properties that get applied to the same things cross-linguistically.

In response, I should say, first, that I am a bit sceptical about the colour case. Colour boundaries are highly variable. For example, one can say that blood is red in Berinmo (a New Guinea language), but the Berinmo term for red would also apply to cotton candy, oranges and plums. In Tarahumara (a Mesoamerican language), speakers can say, ‘Grass is green, and so is the sky’, because one term covers green and blue. In Japanese, there are two terms, but green is regarded as a shade of blue; a granny smith is called a blue apple in Japan. In Hebrew and Russian, there is a separate morpheme for light blue, which is perceived as categorically different from blue, in much the way that we do not see pink as light red. Like our pink, Russian light blue is associated with femininity. In listing these examples, I am not denying that biology constrains colour space, but language imposes category boundaries that alter colour experience and classification. In the moral case, the biological constraints are likely even weaker. We have no proprietary sensory transducers for morality, and, as I argue in ECM, there is no other compelling evidence for an innate moral sense (no selective deficits, no poverty of stimulus arguments, no compelling examples of animal precursors, etc.). So I do not think moral objectivism can be defended by appeal to biologically based norms.

In discussing concept acquisition, Gert introduces another sense in which moral concepts may turn out to be objective. He suggests that moral concepts make no reference to subjective responses. In the colour case, Gert notes the concept red is learned before looks red. We apply colour concepts to things in the world, before we can think about our own subjective states, and the same may be true for moral concepts. Gert does not provide evidence for this, but it seems plausible enough. Many people do not consider subjectivism intuitively obvious. They are surprised when philosophers suggest that badness is the property of causing guilt and outrage. Does not this entail that moral concepts refer to objective properties?
I do not think so. We must be very cautious when inferring claims about reference from claims about what is intuitively obvious; we can be completely wrong about what our concepts refer to. A concept can refer to a response dependent property without our knowing it. Is beauty in the eye of the beholder? Introspection alone would not answer that. When we judge that something is beautiful, we cannot tell if we are tracking an objective property or not. Developmentally, we may acquire the concept of beauty before the concept of aesthetic pleasure, but the things we place under that concept may be united by the fact that they cause aesthetic pleasure, and, depending on how reference is determined, this might entail that the concept refers to that response-dependent property, even if concept possessors do not realize that.

This explains how subjectivism could be true even if it is not obviously true, indeed, even if most concept users think it is false. But why think subjectivism is true? I gave queerness as a reason earlier, but another answer brings us back to relativism. The view I defend in the book is that moral concepts may aspire to pick out objective properties, but they have a fallback plan. Semantically, they operate under the role, let concept C pick out a mind-independent property if there is one that C reliably tracks, and if not, let C pick out the response-dependent property of reliably causing C-tokens. I think this is exactly how colour concepts work. We assume colours are out there on surfaces, but when we learn that there is no uniform external property tracked by any given colour concept, we fall back on a subjectivist view, and conclude that colours depend on our responses. The same kind of conditionally subjectivist semantics governs concepts such as funny, delicious and frightening. I have tested this conjecture experimentally by comparing the concepts red and funny to natural kind concepts, such as beetle and tuberculosis. I predicted that natural kind concepts have no fallback plan; if they do not track an objective property, people will say the concepts do not refer. This is just what I found. When asked about a scenario in which scientists discover that there is no single thing in the world that corresponds to our word ‘beetle’, people say drop the word. But when told there is no single thing that corresponds to ‘red’ or ‘funny’, people insist that things still really are red and funny, but that these properties depend on our responses. The word ‘immoral’ followed exactly the same pattern. People treat immorality as subjective once they see that there is no uniformity in the range of things we call ‘immoral’. If that is right, the best argument for subjectivism is that there is great variation in the range of things we call immoral. This is borne out by cultural variation in moral intuitions. It is also supported by the fact that we moralize domains that have little in common: harms, personality traits, dress, diet and sexual behaviour. This suggests there is no objective essence to the range of things that are immoral, and, thus, being immoral is a matter of causing subjective responses in us.

The final part of Gert’s discussion offers a pre-emptive response to this argument. As noted above, Gert thinks there are paradigm cases of moral
wrongness (e.g. unjustified killing, causing of pain or injury, deception and theft) and exotic cases (e.g. consensual incest and cannibalism). Gert says moral exotica are moral illusions – we mistake them for moral rules under the influence of religion and other sources of misinformation. The paradigm cases are the proper domain of morality, and these are unified in a way that invites philosophical systematization.

As Gert knows, I think this view about the privileged status of harm norms is itself a cultural construction, emerging from Western, liberal, individualism. The intuition that harm norms are privileged would not be shared by some groups in the Far East, who privilege community norms, or South Asia, where purity norms stand out, or among American conservatives, who place equal emphasis on purity and authority. Gay marriage may be a paradigm case of a moral wrong for a conservative.

Gert tries to escape the charge of cultural chauvinism in two ways: he suggests that harm norms enjoy much more consensus, and he suspects that other kinds of norms hinge on religious justifications, which can introduce moral illusions. But I have doubts about both points. Incest norms and harm norms are both widespread (and varied), and rules like ‘Respect your elders’ may be as common as ‘Don’t lie’ or even ‘Don’t cause pain’. Also, as noted above, constraints on social cohesion favour the spread of certain harm norms, but this gives them no greater objectivity. Social pressures may also favour premarital abstinence, strict gender roles and blind obedience to elders, which explains why most societies accept such norms, but that widespread consensus does not compel us to incorporate these into our moral theories.

With respect to religion, it is worth noting that the norms just mentioned often exist without any supernatural back-story. Even norms against gay marriage have more to do with custom than Christ. Are such norms illusions? Well I certainly agree that they are culturally inculcated, but so are harm norms, and if some norms turn out to be more natural, that would not entail that they are more true or more conducive to flourishing.

Perhaps we should forget about finding norms that are objective and focus on adopting subjective norms that will serve us well. In this respect, I think morality may be very different from colour. Contra Gert, I think both colour and value are subjective and relative. In concluding, I want to note that the colour analogy should not be pushed too far (a point I make for other reasons in ECM). Morality is a tool that we create, and it can be adapted to meet changing ends. It is used to organize societies, not to classify objects. This does not undermine the claim that moral concepts refer to secondary qualities, but it does suggest that the degree of variation here may be far greater than in domains linked to the senses.
3. What can we learn from genealogy?

Despite its interdisciplinary methodology, ECM is a pretty conventional contribution to contemporary analytic ethics. It weighs in on current debates and builds on theories that have a distinguished philosophical pedigree. But one aspect of the project is more unusual: the discussion of genealogy. Major philosophers such as Hobbes, Hume and Rousseau offered historical analyses of contemporary values, and Nietzsche made this the central component of his work on morality, but analytic philosophers have failed to follow suit. (Notable exceptions include Alasdair MacIntyre, Ian Hacking and those who work on evolutionary ethics.) Perhaps the evasion of history derives from a desire to develop timeless, universal theories, rather than getting caught up in particulars. Whatever the motive, it might lead some readers to skip over the genealogical parts of ECM, or to regard them as entertaining anecdotes that have little bearing on the philosophical aims of the book.

I am delighted, therefore, that Doris focuses on genealogy in his commentary. Even more significantly, he brings the question of relevance into sharp focus, and, with characteristic panache, shows that genealogical analyses are chronically disappointing from a philosophical perspective. First, he notes that genealogies can cut both ways: they are used to vindicate and to debunk. But then he argues that genealogies never cut very strongly in either direction. It is a platitude that good things can have bad origins, and conversely. Recognizing this, genealogists like me settle for the cautious thesis that historical analyses invite critical reflection on contemporary values; they do not serve as decisive forms of criticism (or confirmation) in their own right. Doris thinks this is modest to a fault. It concedes that genealogy offers little leverage; the ultimate chore of assessing whether a value is worth keeping must be pursued in some non-historical way (e.g. by cost/benefit analysis). At this point, one might expect Doris to lay the historical parts of ECM on the Procrustean bed. Happily, he does no such thing. Instead, he prescribes a cure for disappointment – a way in which historical narratives can earn their keep.

Doris’s proposal is ingenious. When we discover that a moral value has an ugly origin, it does not prove that the value is false, but it undermines the evidential clout of the corresponding moral intuition. Moral deliberation exploits gut feelings, and when something feels bad to us, we tend to campaign against it. In so doing, we regard our sentiments as evidence for wrongness. Genealogy is effective as a critical tool because it can show that a particular moral sentiment is the byproduct of a historical process that is, at best, morally irrelevant. This does not prove that the sentiment is wrong, but it demands that we stop taking the sentiment as authoritative without proving further support.

I like this proposal, but, for a technical reason having to do with my preferred theory of moral values I think it cannot quite work as it stands.
I will bring out the difficulty and offer a friendly amendment. I will also suggest some other ways in which genealogy can be valuable.

First, the technical difficulty. Doris says that genealogy can undermine the evidential value of a moral sentiment. But, the way he presents this proposal implies that there is an inferential step between gut feelings and the judgement that that something is bad. That is a popular view about the way emotions contribute to moral psychology, but I embrace a more radical view. I think emotions constitute judgements. More precisely, the token judgement that φ-ing is bad consists in a negative emotion towards φ-ing. So there is no gap between feeling and believing. Therefore gut feelings cannot be evidence for moral judgements. In this respect, morality differs from religion. Religious experiences are regarded as evidence for beliefs in supernatural entities, so naturalistic explanations of religious experiences undermine their evidential value.

At this point, one might notice an ambiguity in the word ‘evidence’. Sometimes we talk about ‘evidence for a judgement’ and sometimes we talk about ‘evidence of a fact’. Experience of pain cannot be evidence for the recognition that I am in pain, because it constitutes such recognition, but it can be evidence of the fact that I have been injured. Likewise, one might grant that emotions constitute moral judgements (and are thus not evidence for them) while insisting that they are evidence of moral truths. This might look like a way to save Doris’s proposal, but it also faces a technical difficulty. I hold the view that emotions are truth-makers for moral claims. When I say, ‘φ-ing is bad’ that sentence is true just in case I have a sentiment that disposes me to have certain negative emotions to φ-ing. If so, having an emotional response to φ-ing is not evidence that φ-ing is wrong; rather it is that in virtue of which the moral fact obtains. Compare: the gash in my leg is not evidence that I have been injured; it is an injury.

Still, there does seem to be something right about Doris’s insight. On my brand of sentimentalism, emotions are the source of moral truth, but it does not follow that people are aware of this. Some people erroneously believe that moral truth is mind-independent. Such people may regard their emotions as evidence for objective moral facts. As a first stab, then, we might say that genealogy can serve to undermine this regard. People may stop regarding their emotions as evidence of moral truth when they see where those emotions come from. I call this a first stab, because it still misses out on something important. One might complain that we do not need history to convince people that their moral judgements are not evidentially related to moral facts. We can, instead, just do metaethics. Once they see that moral facts are mind-dependent, they will drop the evidential view.

I think history adds something more than we can get out of mere sentimentalist metaethics. To see this, notice that those of us who recognize that moral facts are mind-dependent share something with objectivists: we all want moral emotions to track features of the world that we regard as
good things to moralize. Subjectivists say that the presence of moral emotions is sufficient for making something wrong, but they also believe that we could render different things wrong by changing our attitudes. Normally, though, we presuppose that our emotions are not in need of change. Both objectivists and subjectivists presume that their current values are preferable to alternative values. Genealogy can relate to this presumption in two ways. Noble genealogies support this presumption by providing reasons to think current values are good ones to hold. Ignoble genealogies provide us with reasons for thinking that our current values are not desirable; their origins give us reason to think these values may be bad by our own standards. This, amounts to a satisfying revision of the Doris line. There is no mention of evidence here, but it captures his observation that genealogy undermines confidence in our intuitions. Genealogy does not undermine truth or evidence, but rather targets the status of our gut feelings as reasons for action.

If this is right, then we already have grounds for concluding that genealogy is a valuable tool in moral criticism. But I think we can go further. I think genealogy actually plays a number of different roles that are not easily replaced by other methods. Let me offer five further benefits.

First, genealogy can sever the link between values and the self. We identify with our moral values and we sometimes harbour the illusion that we have chosen them autonomously. Genealogy can show that our values came about through enculturation, and, in so doing, it can lead us to identify less strongly with them. In this respect, genealogy is a bit like the situationist psychology that Doris has so influentially championed in his writings: we think our actions derive from inner traits, but they are heavily influenced by external variables. This discovery challenges theories of human behaviour, and, at a more personal level, erodes our confidence in free will and identity. Likewise, genealogy can help us see (in both a third- and first-person way) that values do not issue from within. Consider political values, for example. You may feel passionate about your politics, but you might feel just as passionate about opposing views if you were raised in a different town. Moreover, the particular constellation of views that comprise your political outlook may be a mishmash of independent concerns that have been cobbled together as a historical accident. For example, American conservatives favour traditionalism (because of immigrants escaping persecution in colonial times), States’ rights (which emerged in the context of the Civil War), and militaristic international intervention (which originates with the Cold War). Liberals tend to be welfarists (which took modern form in the Great Depression), civil rights advocates (which attained centrality after the influx of refugees from Hitler), and pacifists (a reaction to Vietnam). We may feel that these are natural combinations that hang together by rational principles, but toiling around in political history sews seeds of doubt that should make us feel slightly wary about blanket adherence to a party platform.
Second, genealogy can facilitate functional analyses. Moral values are tools, which do things for us and have measurable effects. By studying a value’s past, we can better understand what it does in the present, and what it might be good for. If a value emerged because of its positive consequences, we might decide to keep it. If a value came about through some power play and simply preserves the position of the ruling elite, then that is a reason for moral reform. In ECM, I discuss monogamy norms, which may have their origins in an effort to reduce family size (and increase heirlessness) by the early Christian Church. Monogamy norms also emerged with prohibitions against premarital sex, adoption and divorce. In abandoning these latter norms, we have effectively departed from monogamy, and the advent of effective birth control allows us to determine family size. This may lead us to wonder what good work, if any, monogamy is doing for us, and whether laws against plural marriage are an impediment to maximally fulfilling lives. Alternatively, we may question the value of marriage itself by noting that it emerged to play social roles associated with child rearing and male dominance (wives were domestic servants over whom husbands had exclusive sexual access). Individuals can now raise children alone, and marriage may serve to prolong and exacerbate female dependency on men.

Third, genealogy can be used to discredit legitimating origin myths, revealing hidden motives. Doris cites my story about abortion in this context. Opponents of abortion find justification in the belief that their views derive from the revealed word of God, but historical analysis may show that God’s revealers (the Catholic popes) flip-flopped on the issue in a way that suggests an underlying political agenda. Another example is gay marriage. One can find proscriptions against homosexuality in the Bible, but one can also find norms sanctioning slavery, mass murder, rape, polygamy and other things contemporary Christians condemn, along with numerous rules governing heterosexual relations that look more Taliban than televangelist. Why, then, this selective focus on homosexuality? Homophobia has a long history, but there are also occasional periods of especially organized persecution. For example, in the thirteenth century the Catholic Church became militant about gay sex in a mass effort to curtail the widespread practice among priests, which was eroding their moral authority as advocates of austerity. In the modern American context, there was a concerted effort to medicalize homosexuality between the wars, which was a manifestation the nineteenth century tendency to explain human variation (and legitimate racism) in biological terms. But the current hysteria about homosexuality among the Christian Right may be best understood as a reaction to the 1960s’ sexual revolution, which threatened traditional gender roles and family structure more than it threatened any particular religious doctrine. The Biblical origin story which is used to justify discrimination may actual mask another origin story, which has more to do with threats to the male-dominant household.
Fourth, genealogy is not only the study of where values come from; it is a study of how they change. We must understand the mechanisms of change if we want to reform our values, and, more specifically, we must come to recognize that not all change is progressive. Historical details often matter here. Take the end of slavery, which looks like a clear case of moral progress. That much is hard to contest. But when we discover that the end of slavery coincided with the industrial revolution, we realize that the anti-slavery movement was, in part, an effort to mask the horrendous conditions that wage labourers were being subjected to. Factory conditions have improved in the Western world, but the economic upheavals that brought slavery to an end may have introduced structures of power that continue to legitimate the oppression of workers using the rhetoric of freedom. Or take Foucault’s argument that public torture disappeared with the emergence of power structures that exercise control by surveillance. Another factor may have been the emergence of secular democracy in response to the carnage of the religiously motivated 30 years war. Democracies do not need to establish power by show of strength, because the rulers are the ruled. Kings preserve power by visible ferocity, and democrats preserve power by removing defectors from the public space.

Finally, and most basically, genealogy is interesting. The question of where our values come from is no less captivating than the core questions in metaethics (What makes moral judgements true?), normative ethics (What should I do?), and moral psychology (Are moral judgements intrinsically motivating?). Genealogy does not need to contribute to these other areas to earn its keep. Here, a philosopher might balk, ‘Sure it’s interesting to know why we are no longer cannibals, but it is not philosophically interesting’. Doris and I tend not to get too ruffled when our critics make this move, but, in the present case, there are decisive replies. Genealogical analyses have been offered by some of the most influential philosophers in the Western canon, and they address the seminal philosophical injunction, know thyself. Genealogies are not simply historical accounts of what happened in the past; they are accounts of who we are in the present, informed by an understanding of the events and processes that led to our current condition. And genealogies answer enduring questions about human nature by identifying factors that motivate us and by measuring the extent of human plasticity. If contemporary philosophy has ceased being interested in these questions, then it has become anaemic, and an infusion of genealogy might provide the cure.

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