

Methodological Issues of a Genealogy of Truth

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Abstract

In *The “Post-truth” Crisis, the Value of Truth, and the Substantivist-Deflationist Debate* Gila Sher attempts to account for truth as an intrinsic human value. We argue that — to reach her goal — she adopts a genealogical perspective. We show that such a methodology yields problematic implications for the overall success of her argument: the lack of precision allows for an indefinite variance of genealogies, and the origin of truth seems unrelated to its inherent nature.

Keywords

Genealogy, Truth, Value of Truth, Nietzsche, Alethic pluralism

Genealogy is a philosophical method of tracing back a concept’s historical origins to show that its development is not influenced only by theoretical factors, but also by historical and social ones. In (Sher 2024) Gila Sher attempts to account for truth as an intrinsic human value, and — we argue — she does it by adopting a genealogical perspective, something quite unusual

in the tradition of analytic philosophy of truth (with notable exceptions, see Williams 2010). We aim to uncover the importance of this methodological perspective for Sher's solution, and to show that genealogy may yield problematic implications for the overall success of her argument.

1 Value, norms, and properties

Sher begins her article by noticing that the loss of truth as a value we are facing today — the post-truth crisis — is so radical and universal that it forces us to rethink our way of addressing the issue of truth. Philosophers of truth should reconsider truth as a complex phenomenon involving both the property and the value of truth, with the crucial role played by the latter. According to Sher, indeed, “truth is, first and foremost, a human value”¹, and being a human value, it is “a value we choose to represent our humanity rather than a value that is forced upon us”². She explains that humans chose truth as a value constituting their humanity due to their basic epistemic situation, which is entangled with essential epistemic needs — e.g. the desire to know the world as it is for its own sake — and peculiar cognitive features. Sher argues that the basic human epistemic situation is the reason why truth arose as a value, that truth as a value gives rise to (or is connected with) a cluster of epistemic norms, and that these norms give rise to the truth property. This means that — in Sher perspective — truth is an intrinsic value of our humanity because it satisfies an intrinsic need.

¹ Sher 2024, p. 5.

² Sher 2024, p. 8.

Despite the crucial role played by the “giving rise to” relation in her explanation, Sher does not provide a clear characterization thereof. There are however some hints on how to understand it. First, Sher explicitly says that such a relation is not intended to establish a metaphysical priority of any kind between the value and the property³. Second, Sher argues, the relation should be interpreted in epistemic terms. However, not all epistemic readings of the relation are admissible: Sher’s epistemological approach must be taken into consideration.

Traditional epistemic foundationalism posits that all items of knowledge are — directly or indirectly — grounded on reality, and that there is a strictly ordered relation between them. From Sher’s perspective — called “foundational holism” — this relation is not necessarily strictly ordered. Instead, all the elements of the epistemic enterprise influence each other. This means that there is no strong epistemic priority between truth as a value and truth as a property⁴. However, despite Sher’s holism, some stages of her explanation cannot be reversed. Notably, without the basic human epistemic situation truth couldn’t have arisen as a value — at least in the way Sher understands it. But then, how should we precisely interpret Sher’s account?

³ Sher 2024, p. 7.

⁴ Sher 2024. The overall epistemic perspective is put forward in Sher 2016.

2 The genealogical method

In philosophy, genealogy serves as a tool for reconstructing the historical development of a concept, from its origin onward. Typically, the primary philosophical objective of a genealogy is to unveil how the origin of a concept discloses something profound and somewhat unexpected about it; it reveals to us something we could not have known just by taking the concept at hand at face value, as it presents itself to us in everyday use. The basic idea is that to fully comprehend a concept we must delve into its origin and cease to consider it as if it had always been there.

In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche 1887), Nietzsche pioneered the genealogical method where he aimed to unveil how Western moral values — often thought to be ahistorical, God-given, and immutable — are nothing but the reflection of the worldviews of two different kinds of people, the strong and the weak or the noble and the low. Each of these groups has its own set of moral values, its own “Good” and “Bad”. The current morality of the West, Nietzsche argues, is not something we should see as set in stone, for it actually derives from the slave morality of the weak. Nietzsche’s genealogical account aims to show how considering morality as something atemporal fails to properly represent our moral values, a representation that cannot be reached except through a thorough historical analysis. Thus, the genealogical method allows for a criticism of the tendency of certain philosophy to consider concepts as ahistorical entities, independent of any contingency.

The genealogical method implies a distinct view of concepts. On this account, concepts are influenced by many different, often contingent, factors. They do not arise in a vacuum; rather, their origin and development are often linked to specific human needs and historical circumstances, usually unrelated to theoretical discourse. In her recent (Novaes 2020), Catarina Dutilh Novaes provides a genealogical account of deduction aimed at showing its dialogical features. On her account, the social and political setting of the Athenian democracy is crucial to comprehend the genesis of the Aristotelian understanding of deduction. On genealogical accounts such as Dutilh Novaes', concepts arise and develop influenced by many different elements at once. Both socio-cultural and theoretical aspects may have a relevant impact on concepts, including deduction. This last feature clearly links to another typical aspect of genealogies: concepts, as much as they appear to be purely theoretical entities, arise also to perform social, political, and ultimately human functions.

3 A genealogy of truth

Our claim is that Sher's account is a genealogy. This feature might easily go unnoticed, and not without cause. While typically genealogies embrace a large period of time, and investigate a concept through numerous changes, Sher's explanation of how we got to the property of truth from our basic epistemic situation would be, from a genealogical standpoint, just an instant of a larger genealogical process. On the same note, her account lacks direct reference to specific historical or social circumstances — apart from the post-

truth situation. Sher's account is in a sense more of an ideal reconstruction of how we got to truth, setting her apart from classical genealogies.

Nonetheless, Sher's explanation is an instance of this method. She explains how we — as humans — got in touch with truth, driven by the needs of our basic human epistemic situation. Hers is a story of how a concept achieved its relevance. Moreover, genealogies aim to illuminate how the origin of a concept may tell us something profound and unexpected. Sher's explanation does precisely that: it shows that truth is intrinsically a value by illustrating that it emerges from our basic epistemic situation. On this account, truth is not just a property of propositions or sentences governed by a certain set of rules but arises in order to fulfill some of our basic, and very tangible, needs. And the fact that it arises because of those circumstances is revealing about its nature; it tells us that truth is intrinsically a human value.

Usually in genealogies, the history and genesis of a concept are shaped by many different factors. And Sher's starting point, our basic epistemic situation, is a compound of diverse elements. All these different aspects contribute to giving rise to the value and the norms of truth, and, indirectly, to the property of truth. Sher mentions several of these factors: the organization of our society, our cognitive abilities, and the very makeup of the world. Notice here that the assumptions of Sher's account seem to align with those of other genealogists such as Nietzsche: both appear to assume that considering concepts as if they were completely detached from reality fails to appreciate their real significance. We only understand what truth really is —

a human value — when we look at the different social, theoretical, and contingent factors that gave rise to it, and cease to consider it merely in the abstract.

Furthermore, since some of these factors represent needs that must be met, truth arises to perform certain functions — and this aspect can be found also in other genealogies. Although her genealogy seems to consider just an ideal snapshot of the history of truth, Sher's overall argument is built upon the very idea that historical and social conjunctures are leading us into a post-truth crisis, and may also lead us eventually to lose truth, the same way that the social features of the epistemic situation led us to acquire it. This danger of losing truth that drives Sher's arguments proves that her explanation is just one step in a possible history of truth — a history in which we might also end up losing it. Notice that the genealogical interpretation we gave is perfectly compatible with foundational holism: the different steps of her explanation might influence one another, without there being a clear priority or dependence between them, and Sher herself acknowledges that her account is an improvement of Williams' genealogy (Sher 2024, p. 11).

4 Two methodological issues

We have argued that Sher's project is a genealogy. As such, it has two drawbacks. One has to do with variance, the other with the philosophical use of genealogies. Let us first consider variance. Genealogies tell stories, and these stories must be true to the facts, in some way or another. Sher's

explanation is no exception. On Sher's account, humans chose truth as an intrinsic human value, and their choice is due to their basic epistemic situation, their human needs and purposes. Suppose Sher's hypothesis is correct. If so, something must have occurred at some point in history: psychological, behavioural, and social facts about what happened to humans when they first stumbled upon truth. She should provide a precise enough and faithful to the facts hypothesis to truly account for such historical and sociological events. However, Sher doesn't mention any such event, making her story vague and hazy. With this level of vagueness, the relevant facts can in principle be compatible with countless alternative stories.

Consider the following alternative story. Humans have the basic instinct of survival. However, they find themselves in a dangerous environment where communication is key: it allows for the transmission of knowledge, which is essential for avoiding dangers and spreading healthy practices. Learning from others how things really are increases their chance of survival. Take, for instance, a primitive hunting trip. It is crucial for the success of the hunt — and the hunters' survival — that instructions correspond to reality. In this alternative story, truth arises from the basic human need of survival, but also in this case truth becomes essentially a human value, being what satisfies an intrinsic human need. This and many other plausible stories may be told — all of which in harmony with the facts. There is no suitable criterion to choose among them. The reason is that the relevant facts cannot falsify one genealogical explanation among a set of equally plausible explanations. To be falsifiable, an explanation should somehow contradict facts, but Sher's

account is not sufficiently precise to allow for contradiction, and indefinite variance follows.

At this point, one could argue that if Sher provided a more precise explanation, this problematic variance would disappear. We believe it ain't that easy. For one thing, it is unlikely we'll ever access the mental processes and behaviors of people who lived centuries ago, making it improbable for us to ever verify Sher's eventual amendment. However, even if data were available, it is not so obvious that this would suffice. Indeed, genealogies usually exhibit a certain degree of imprecision.

That is to say that, typically, the level of explanation of genealogies is higher than the level of single relevant facts we could ideally reach — like specific activated brain areas or single sentences pronounced by people on specific occasions. In general, genealogies do not tell us that there is a single simple fact that is the source of — say — the concept of truth, but they tell us that the sum of all simple relevant facts influences — or contributes to explain — why a concept arose. Even knowing all the facts, this would not suffice to discriminate between genealogies in order to choose the correct one. If this is the case, the problem wouldn't merely be Sher's precision, but the methodology she adopts: genealogies would then be intrinsically vague. We are aware this point would require additional data and argumentation. We want only to notice that precision could not be the cause, but the effect of a more general problem. Be that as it may, our point is that either Sher's

genealogy is not sufficiently precise, or genealogies in general are structurally vague. In either case, indefinite variance follows.

Another issue emerges. Philosophical genealogy is typically employed to draw strong conclusions about the nature of a concept, an idea, or a conviction. Sher too seems to be committed to the idea that the way in which we arrive at truth strongly characterizes its nature. However, this is problematic in at least two respects.

Imagine a primitive society whose members have no conceptual resources concerning truth. One day, two of them — Sacha and Francesca — decide to play a game. The game consists of taking a simple sentence — “The bear I ate was delicious” — and attributing to it some features. Whoever is able to list the most properties of the sentence wins the game. Sacha begins with “the sentence has six words”. To which Francesca replies “the sentence contains only one one-letter word”. And so forth. At some point, Sacha cries “the sentence corresponds to something that really happened, it corresponds to the facts!”. In fact, Sacha had just eaten bear meat and found it delicious. Having listed the most features, Sacha won the game. Suppose that this story is faithful to the facts and that truth is to be interpreted as correspondence. In this case, Sher should claim that an essential feature of truth is that of having been discovered by Sacha in a pointless game purportedly played centuries ago. But less bizarre stories might be provided. Take for instance our alternative story about truth arising from the need for survival. In that case, Sher should admit that truth is essentially characterized by that need.

If the origins of the concept of truth determine — or are strongly relevant to — its nature, Sher should be willing to accept that this is so also in the case of weird — or philosophically undesirable — origins. But we doubt Sher would welcome such a consequence.

Another point of the philosophical use of genealogies relates to the invariance of a concept. Genealogies identify the origin and historical development of some concepts with their nature. However, we can conceive possible and plausible situations in which the same concept has originated in different ways — like Sacha's story or the survival story. It follows that the same concept may have different origins. It seems then implausible that the nature of a concept might be reduced to its origins and development. Different origins do not necessarily entail different concepts.

5 Final remarks

Sher's objective was to explain why truth is an intrinsic value for humanity. We have argued that Sher's answer is a genealogical one, and that this apparently innocent methodology carries with it serious drawbacks. First, the lack of precision allows for an indefinite variance of genealogies. To settle the issue Sher should provide us with a criterion to choose between apparently equal explanations. Second, the philosophical use of genealogy implies the reduction of the nature of a concept to its origins. And this seems to be false: not only the same concept might have been generated in different ways, but these ways could be weird enough to discourage such a reduction. While we ultimately believe that more work is to be done to address these

flaws of the genealogical method, we concur with Sher's emphasis on the need for philosophers of truth to account for truth as an intrinsic value.

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