The Normative Relevance of Conceptual History

By David Plunkett
Dartmouth College

May 3, 2013

- do not cite or circulate without permission -

Abstract.

Many philosophers have been drawn to the idea that facts about the history of concepts (facts about what I call “conceptual history”) can have significant implications for normative inquiry. Many of the leading arguments given for the relevance of conceptual history are coupled with controversial positions in other parts of philosophy – e.g., views about the nature of concepts, normativity, or mental content. In this paper, I give an argument for the normative relevance of conceptual history that doesn’t take on board these views. My argument in this paper revolves around the following two basic ideas. First, some concepts are more apt for use in normative inquiry than others, and we should use those available ones that are most apt. Second, knowing about the history of concepts can help us assess how apt (or not apt) for normative inquiry some concepts are likely to be now, or in the future. Put together, these two thoughts form the core of a straightforward case for the normative relevance of conceptual history.

Introduction.

Whenever one engages in normative or evaluative thinking, that thinking always involves employing certain concepts. For instance, suppose Jonathan has the normative thought that all American universities should employ some form of affirmative action in their admissions decisions. In thinking this thought, Jonathan is employing certain specific concepts – including, for instance, UNIVERSITY, AFFIRMATIVE ACTION, and DECISION.¹ These concepts are constituent components of his particular thought: in broad terms, these concepts help to determine what that particular thought is about. Much of the time, when we engage in normative and evaluative thought – including, importantly, when philosophers do so in the context of philosophical discussion about normative and evaluative topics – we use certain concepts rather than mention them. That is: rather than thinking about the concepts that we are using in normative and evaluative thought, we instead employ those concepts in order to

¹ Following one standard convention, I will henceforth designate concepts in this paper by using smallcaps. On this convention, see (Margolis and Laurence 1999).
think certain normative and evaluative thoughts about things other than those concepts themselves. For instance, when Robert Nozick objects in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* to certain redistributive political arrangements based on the way they conflict with certain rights that human beings have, he is most straightforwardly read as making a claim using the concept RIGHTS rather than making a claim about the concept RIGHTS.²

That being said, one familiar move in normative or evaluative argument is for someone to respond to a claim made using a given concept C by making a claim about that very same concept C. One important type of claim that is frequently made in this way is the following: claims that concern historical facts about that concept (or a set of concepts of which it is a part). For instance, to take a well-known example, consider Nietzsche’s work in *On the Genealogy of Morals.*³ One way to read a core part of the *On the Genealogy of Morals* is this: against a background discourse in which people use certain specifically moral concepts (such as, for instance, the concept MORAL OBLIGATION) to make action-guiding normative claims, Nietzsche responds not by making a claim using those moral concepts in question, but rather by telling us a history of how we started thinking thoughts using those particular concepts, as well as some of what the practical consequences have been of thinking thoughts using those concepts since their initial emergence. The story that Nietzsche tells here isn’t a pretty one. In broad terms, Nietzsche’s claim is that certain specifically moral concepts (roughly, the ones that we use in the modern era) first emerged as part of an attempt by some to seek vengeance on others, and not because of anything to do with their epistemic value in learning the truth about the world or the truth about how to live. In turn, he claims that those concepts have served to legitimate an order that stifles human flourishing, and which, moreover, doesn’t help us better grasp any important facts. For Nietzsche, these are not simply interesting historical observations about how certain of our concepts first emerged and how they have been put to use. Rather, for him, they are historical observations that are meant to have normative bite: in short, they are part of an attack on traditional forms of modern morality, and on modern moral philosophy.

Philosophers obviously have differing views about the historical accuracy of Nietzsche’s claims that I have just glossed. Moreover, philosophers also have diverse reactions to the sort of argumentative move that Nietzsche makes here of appealing to historical

---

² (Nozick 1974).
³ (Nietzsche 1994).
facts (namely, on the particular reading of Nietzsche I am glossing here, of appealing to historical facts about the emergence of our moral concepts and what has been subsequently done with them) in order to make a fundamentally normative, rather than historical point. Some philosophers worry that the move rests on some sort of genetic fallacy, or, perhaps on some sort of category confusion between two fundamentally different types of claim. Others suspect that there is something to the sort of argumentative move that Nietzsche is making if his historical claims are true – and indeed there might be lots of different ways that such historical claims might matter to normative argument – but aren’t totally sure what those ways are. And still others are convinced that Nietzsche’s historical claims (if true) would have striking normative import and claim that they have a good story to tell about what that import is.

These different reactions to Nietzsche’s argumentative move (rather than to the historical accuracy of his claims) touch on a very general abstract question that I want to focus on in this paper. The question is this: what sort of normative or evaluative import can historical claims about our concepts have? To put it in slightly more specific terms, the historical facts I am going to be concerned with are as follows: a) descriptive facts about how, when, or why a given concept (or a set of concepts) first emerged in use and b) descriptive facts about what people have done with a given concept or set of concepts after this emergence. I will refer to both types of fact as facts about conceptual history. In short, what I want to know is this: do facts about conceptual history matter to the project of

---

4 Inquiry into the sorts of historical facts that I am interested in here is sometimes referred to as a form of “genealogical” inquiry. If one adopted this way of talking, then one might think of the facts of conceptual history as essentially facts about conceptual genealogy. However, for the purposes of this paper, I will avoid this way of talking. This is because certain philosophers (e.g., Foucault) want to associate “genealogy” with a particular method of doing historical work, or, on a related note, to historical work done in a way that is tied to the aim of making a practical difference of a certain sort. See, for instance, (Foucault 1984). I want a way to target historical facts about concept emergence and past use in a way that is neutral on such issues – i.e., that allows us to talk about these historical facts regardless of how they are studied, and regardless of any practical aim one has in studying them. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, I will stick with talking of “conceptual history” rather than “conceptual genealogy”. It should be stressed that, in so doing, I do not mean to take a stand on how to best understand what different philosophers such as Nietzsche mean by the term “genealogy”. Instead, I make this choice about terminology only to help us stay focused on the topic I want to address in this paper.
normative or evaluative inquiry (inquiry, roughly, about what should be the case or, similarly, about what is better or worse)? And, if so, why?⁵

Philosophers who make the case for the relevance of conceptual history to normative inquiry – whether normative inquiry in ethics, social/political philosophy, philosophy of science, epistemology, or any other field – often put their arguments forward in the context of work that covers a range of issues in philosophy, including issues about the nature of normative inquiry, concepts, and general philosophical methodology. Many parts of this work inevitably end up being controversial, especially when the views about the normative relevance of concepts are (at least seemingly) presented as part of a package deal involving views on some (or all) of these other philosophical topics.

For instance, consider here some of best-known historical figures who champion the use of conceptual history in normative inquiry: Nietzsche, Hegel, Heidegger, and Foucault. All of these figures have notoriously radical views on a range of topics in philosophy, and they rarely (if ever) separate out the rationale for the use of conceptual history in normative inquiry in a way that hangs free from the rest of their views. A similar point holds – though certainly not to the same degree – to some of the main contemporary philosophers that have discussed the relevance of conceptual history to normative inquiry, such as Raymond Geuss, Arnold Davidson, Alastair MacIntyre, Robert Brandom, and Ian Hacking.⁶ Many of these contemporary philosophers that I just mentioned – Davidson and Hacking especially – do much to make a general case for the normative relevance of conceptual history in a way that is more general and philosophically inclusive than the cases made by figures such as Heidegger and Hegel. Nonetheless, even Davidson and Hacking still often couple their arguments with other controversial philosophical claims – e.g., claims dismissive of the possibility of or philosophical usefulness of conceptual analysis via the eliciting of case intuitions, or claims about the basic metaphysics of concepts, or claims in favor of strong forms of social externalism in the philosophy of mind – that can make it seem that these are positions that hang together as part of a unified outlook on philosophy more generally.

⁵ In what follows, I will, by default, follow one standard convention within contemporary metanormative theory and use the term “normative” in a broad sense to cover both the normative and the evaluative. I do this only for convenience, and it should therefore not be read as involving any claims about the explanatory priority of normative facts (roughly, facts about what one should do, think, or feel) to evaluative facts (roughly, facts about what is good or bad).

⁶ See (Geuss 2001a), (Davidson 2001), (MacIntyre 1984), (Brandom 1994), and (Hacking 2002).
rather than just a position within normative theory about the evidential relevance of claims from conceptual history. This impression is exacerbated by the fact that many of the proponents of the normative relevance of conceptual history – for instance, Geuss here being a case in point – tend to claim that their general philosophical outlook is one that stands in direct opposition to the main currents of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. That might be wrong. But it doesn’t help in making a general and philosophically inclusive case for the normative relevance of conceptual history.

In short, given the way that the case for the normative relevance of conceptual history is often put forward, it can lead to the impression that, in order to accept the thesis that conceptual history has relevance to normative inquiry, one needs to also take on a host of controversial philosophical positions – positions that, at the very least, take a stand on important philosophical debates within contemporary philosophy (e.g., the internalism/externalism debates about content). One can thus be left with the view that, if one doesn’t accept such-and-such other controversial philosophical positions, then there isn’t a good case to be made for the normative relevance of conceptual history – and, thus, that conceptual history can always be safely ignored while engaged in normative inquiry. I think this view, however, is seriously mistaken. Many of the core reasons why conceptual history has normative relevance can be articulated and defended within is a framework that doesn’t rely on taking a controversial stand on topics in other parts of philosophy, and which will be congenial to a wide range of philosophers working within the main currents of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. My goal in this paper is to make the core of that case.

My argument in this paper revolves around the following two basic ideas. First, some concepts are more apt for use in normative inquiry than others, and we should use those available ones that are most apt. Second, knowing about the history of concepts can help us assess how apt (or not apt) for normative inquiry some concepts are likely to be now, or in the future. Put together, these two thoughts form the core of a straightforward case for the normative relevance of conceptual history.

Crucially, nothing in the case that I make rests on the sort of controversial or unorthodox philosophical theses that standardly show up in discussions of the normative relevance of conceptual history. For instance, it doesn’t take on any radical claims about the metaphysics of normativity (e.g., that some form of anti-realism or framework relativism is
true about normative facts, properties, etc.)⁷, the metaphysics of concepts (e.g., that they themselves are fundamentally social or historical entities)⁸, the nature of linguistic or mental content (e.g., that some strong form of externalism is true)⁹, or meta-philosophical positions about the nature of philosophy as such (e.g., that many philosophical problems can be undone by a mixture of Wittgensteinian therapeutic practice and Foucaultian genealogy).¹⁰ While some of these further theses might of course be true, I take it as a distinct philosophical advantage of my argument that it rests on none of them. This is for two reasons. First, by avoiding use of these further theses, my argument takes on fewer controversial premises, thus making the argument less vulnerable to attack. Second, by proceeding in this way, I argue that we end up with a clearer and more distilled understanding of some of the main reasons why conceptual history is relevant to normative inquiry.¹¹

A question you might have from the start. You might wonder: if I am claiming that conceptual history has normative relevance, exactly how much does it have? Similarly, one might want to know: which specific instances of conceptual history are particularly important for normative inquiry, and what exactly do they show? These are important questions. But they are not the questions that I want to address in this paper. The main question I address is a much more basic and foundational one: namely, can facts about

⁷ See (Geuss 2001a), (Geuss 2008), (Hacking 2002), and (Davidson 2001).
⁸ Versions of this thesis show up in (Geuss 2001a), (Hacking 2002), (Brandom 1994), (Daston and Galison 2007), and (Davidson 2001).
⁹ Semantic externalism is a major component of Sally Haslanger’s work on the import of genealogy. See (Haslanger 2005) and (Haslanger 2000). Haslanger doesn’t position her work on genealogy in terms of its relevance to normative inquiry as such – and, indeed, rarely herself engages directly in normative inquiry herself. Nonetheless, it is also clear that Haslanger does take her general work to have import for those engaged in normative inquiry – e.g., in shaping what kinds of concepts one uses in asking normative questions – and, thus, insofar as Haslanger takes genealogy to be relevant to her bigger project, it is reasonable to conclude that, for her, genealogy is also relevant to normative inquiry. Some form of semantic externalism is also arguably a central component of (Heidegger 1962) and (Davidson 2001). For two of the classic statements of the broad type of externalism I have in mind here see (Burge 1979) and (Putnam 1997).
¹⁰ See (Davidson 2001) and (Hacking 2002).
¹¹ By proceeding in this way, my work in this paper indirectly raises an important question: if you think conceptual history matters in additional ways that I don’t talk about it in this paper – including, perhaps more radical ways – then can you make the case for why that it is so using the basic framework I am operating in? Or do you need to add in additional controversial views about, say, externalism about mental content or anti-Platonism about the metaphysics of concepts? These are important questions, especially against a backdrop in which many of the explicit champions of the normative relevance of conceptual history at least seem to want to make more radical claims about that relevance than I do in this paper. I plan to take up these questions directly in future work.
conceptual history be normatively relevant? I will argue that they can be. I will do so by advancing a basic *structural* claim: roughly, that facts about conceptual history can be the sorts of things that bear on the degree to which belief in certain normative propositions is justified, or the degree to which asking certain normative questions is justified. If you want to know how much certain facts about conceptual history matter to such-and-such part of normative inquiry, the basic answer I want to give is this: there is no good way to tell in abstraction from looking at the actual relevant details of the relevant parts of conceptual history and, more importantly, actually engaging in the relevant part of normative inquiry.

The framework that I advance in this paper thus leaves open that for many cases of normative inquiry, facts about conceptual history won’t be things that are that important to pay attention to – or even that are totally evidentially inert in such-and-such case at hand. Is that a problem for my arguments in this paper? Far from it. My goal here is not to overturn standard methodological assumptions in normative theory, nor is it to make the claim that facts about conceptual history are always an extremely important source of evidence in normative inquiry. Rather, my goal is much more modest: I want to explain some of the very basic mechanisms by which conceptual history can matter to our assessment of normative positions and normative questions, and, thus, be relevant to doing normative inquiry. In turn, I think that understanding these mechanisms can put us in a better position to assess claims about how such-and-such (purported) facts of conceptual history matter to such-and-such part of normative inquiry. But actually doing that assessment is the task of further work that goes well beyond anything that I argue in this paper.

Given that my claims here are so modest, one might wonder: why exactly does any of this matter? After all, how many philosophers explicitly deny the normative relevance of conceptual history? Isn’t all the action therefore simply on figuring on exactly how much it matters and in what specific places it does matter? My basic answer to such worries is this. It is standard practice in large parts of contemporary normative inquiry that happens in the broadly American-American context to simply *ignore or not worry about* conceptual history. Is ignoring conceptual history justified? Perhaps it is in many (even most) cases. But when contemporary philosophers working in normative inquiry ignore conceptual history, they often have little (or no) explicit argument for why they are doing so. If my basic point in this paper is right, then conceptual history can provide information that matters to normative inquiry. This should undercut those who would dismiss appeals to conceptual history as
obviously concerning information that is irrelevant to the normative issues at hand, or simply don’t bother to think about the question of the normative relevance of conceptual history at all. Another way to put this point is as follows. My argument in this paper is that conceptual history can provide information (or evidence) that matters to our assessment of how justified we are in believing certain normative propositions, or in asking certain normative questions. Maybe you have an argument up your sleeve that such evidence can always be safely ignored. But until such an argument is given, it is relatively safe to assume that, other things being equal, philosophers engaged in normative inquiry should be open to conceptual history mattering to what they are doing. And this, I think, is an important methodological consequence of the basic view that I advance in this paper – namely, the view that conceptual history can be normatively relevant.

1. Conceptual Ethics.

In this section, I develop the first main idea in my argument for why conceptual history matters to normative inquiry. This idea is as follows: some concepts are more apt for use in normative inquiry than others, and we should use those available ones that are most apt. This idea has two main components: (a) the thesis that some concepts are more apt for use in normative inquiry than others and (b) the thesis that we should use those available ones that are most apt. So I will argue for each thesis in turn. In making this case, I will not make any use of the idea of conceptual history at all, nor rely on any facts of conceptual history. And I take it that it should be a case that many will be on board with, regardless of any views they do or don’t have about the normative relevance of conceptual history. My strategy in what follows in the rest of the paper will then be this: in the following sections (§2-4), I will explain how learning about the history of concepts can help us assess how apt (or not apt) for normative inquiry some concepts are likely to be now, or in the future. Put together, these two thoughts form the core of my case for the normative relevance of conceptual history.

In order to motivate my claim that some concepts are more apt for use in normative inquiry than others, let’s start with the following case. Helen is a biologist, whose main research aims to better understand the effects of certain genetic modification of tomatoes, including the effects on the color and taste of those tomatoes. In pursuing her research, Helen will, like all of us who think thoughts, use certain concepts rather than others. One
sort question we can ask about the concepts that Helen uses is a descriptive one. The standard aim of conceptual analysis is to answer one important type of descriptive question about one (or more) of the given concepts used by someone like Helen: roughly, what the relevant concept is that Helen in fact uses and what the content of that concept is.\(^{12}\) In contrast, another sort of question we can ask about the concepts that Helen uses is a normative one. For instance, we can ask: which concepts should Helen be using when she engages in her biological research? Or, similarly, we can ask: which concepts would it be better for Helen to use in her biological research? These are questions not in conceptual analysis, but what I will call conceptual ethics.\(^{13}\)

Suppose, then, that we ask the normative question of which concepts Helen should use in doing her biological research. Here are some plausible views in conceptual ethics about this question: she should use a concept on which tomatoes are counted as fruits (rather than as vegetables, as on the concept expressed by the term “tomato” in our general culinary practices); she should use color concepts more like GREEN than GRUE; she should use the concept GENETIC; she should use the concept DNA; she should use the concept EVOLUTION BY NATURAL SELECTION; and she should use the concept EVIDENCE. There are different

\(^{12}\) Different theories of conceptual analysis – based, in part, on different theories of the metaphysics of concepts – revolve around different ideas about what it is to identify the content of a concept. For my purposes here, I don’t need to wade into these debates. All I need is that conceptual analysis concerns the descriptive question of what concepts a thinker uses, and what the content of those concepts is. This should be kept in mind throughout this paper when I talk about “conceptual analysis”. The term “conceptual analysis” is sometimes used in a narrow sense to refer to a part of a specific given philosophical program – say, for instance, as a component of early to mid-twentieth-century British philosophy. I do not intend to use the term that way. As I will understand the term in this paper, “conceptual analysis” refers to the project of trying to understand the content of concepts however the methodology and metaphysics for this is understood.

\(^{13}\) My use of the term “conceptual ethics” here draws on (Burgess and Plunkett Manuscript-a) and (Burgess and Plunkett Manuscript-b). It should be stressed that, in calling these normative questions about concept use ones in “conceptual ethics”, I do not mean to here claim that these are questions about how Helen should treat others or engage in practical deliberation. Rather, the “ethics” in “conceptual ethics” is used in a very broad sense – to designate questions about how to live and what to do. Conceptual behavior is behavior too, and so there is good reason to think that there is a broad use of the term “ethics” here that works. The main reason that I use the phrase “conceptual ethics” here, rather than a more precise phrase such as “normative and evaluative questions about concept use”, is because the former is a much more convenient handle for the topic at hand. For more on the reasons for this terminological choice, see (Burgess and Plunkett Manuscript-a). It should also be noted that much of what I say in this paper about conceptual ethics resonates with the core line of thought in (Burgess and Plunkett Manuscript-a) and (Burgess and Plunkett Manuscript-b). The reader is encouraged to consult those two papers for further work on conceptual ethics that goes beyond what I say in this paper.
foundational accounts in conceptual ethics that one can give that help to explain why these
are correct views in conceptual ethics (or, if they are not correct views, that would explain
why whatever are the correct views are correct). Some of these stories will have more to do
with the objective features of the subject matter she is studying, others more to do with
Helen and her interests in the world (or her limited cognitive capacities), and others more to
do with social facts about the aims of the broader research community that Helen is a part
of.

Here is the basic claim that I want to make about conceptual ethics in the case of
Helen. Whatever precise answer we give to the question of which concepts Helen should be
using – and whatever sort of foundational story we might (or might not) give for why these
answers are correct – all of us should be on board with the idea that there are some concepts
that will be more apt (or, similarly, better) for use in contemporary biological research. Not all
concepts are created equal for the purposes of doing biological research in a contemporary
setting. Some concepts (plausibly, the ones I glossed above) are more apt to use than others.
To deny this would, among other things, be to deny that the concept TOMATO is any more
apt to use in biological research about tomatoes than the concept TOMATO-OR-CAR-OR-THE
BASKETBALL IN ANDY’S OFFICE (which is a concept that, by stipulation, picks out exactly the
gerrymandered union of objects it sounds like it does). It is not plausible to deny that both
of these are equally good concepts for the purposes of doing biological research.

With the idea in hand that some concepts are more apt for Helen to use in her
biological research than others, we can now ask: which ones should she use for doing her
biological research? The answer we should give, I suggest, stems from a fairly
straightforward thought: she should aim to use the ones that are most apt. The concept
TOMATO-OR-CAR is more apt than the concept TOMATO-OR-CAR-OR-THE BASKETBALL IN
ANDY’S OFFICE, but the former is more apt than the latter. And both are less apt than
TOMATO. This underwrites the account we should give of which concepts Helen should use
for doing her biological research. But, importantly, it doesn’t fully settle it. Among other
things, as many of those working in conceptual history are keen to underscore, there is some
important sense in which certain concepts simply aren’t available for certain agents, agents
that are always situated in a given social-historical context. The ultimate story about which

---

14 For forceful articulations of this idea, see (Hacking 2002), (Davidson 2001), and (Daston and
Galison 2007).
concepts Helen should use for doing her biological research will likely need to take account of this fact. So we might end up saying something like this: Helen should use those concepts that are most apt, given the range of concepts available to her.\textsuperscript{15} This answer might of course be tweaked further, but I think the basic picture here is on firm ground – and it is fleshed out enough for my purposes at hand.

The story I have given here about Helen has focused on her involvement in the activity of biological research. But the basic line of thought is entirely general. The thought is this: for any given research project that someone is engaged in, some concepts will be more apt to use than others. In general terms, this is because some concepts will allow us to better carry out the aims of that research activity than others. In fact, the same basic thought here applies to projects in general. My cooking dinner with my friend Max for a dinner party isn’t a research project, but it still involves thinking, and hence still involves concepts – some of which will allow me to more effectively carry out this project than others (e.g., it might be helpful for me to use the concepts \textit{MAIN DISH}, \textit{DESSERT}, and \textit{FRYING PAN}).

Consider then the case of normative inquiry. When someone is engaged in an inquiry of any sort, we can think of the inquirer as having a goal that is constitutive of engaging in \textit{that} form of inquiry in particular. In general, we might say that this is the goal of getting the \textit{correct} theory of whatever it is that she is studying.\textsuperscript{16} If one grants this point about \textit{correctness}, it means that in the case of normative inquiry the goal of this inquiry is to get the correct theory of what this inquiry is about. For normative inquiry, this inquiry is about, roughly, 1) normative facts, i.e. facts about what \textit{should} be the case (e.g., how an individual should act, think, or feel, or how the law should operate) or 2) evaluative facts, i.e. facts about what is \textit{better or worse} (e.g. what makes for one scientific theory being better than another, or what makes for a good piece of artwork). The former is “normative” inquiry (in the narrow sense of the term), while the latter is “evaluative” inquiry. For convenience, following one standard

\footnote{\textsuperscript{15} By “available”, I mean here \textit{whatever} the relevant sense of “available” here is, which is itself a tricky question. It is not a sense of available that is equivalent to “metaphysically possible”, since what matters here is something about what’s possible \textit{relative to} a given social-historical context. I leave it as an open question for the purposes of this paper how to cash out the relevant modal notions here.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{16} It is plausible to think that – at least for many domains of inquiry – what makes a theory correct is that it is the \textit{true} theory. I think that holds for normative inquiry, as much as it does for biological inquiry. However, one need not take this on board. As long as one grants the general point that inquiry aims at a correct theory of what it is studying, this is that I need.}
convention in contemporary philosophy, I will often use the term “normative” in this paper in a broad sense to cover both narrowly normative and evaluative matters.

This way of putting things about normative inquiry is intended to be quite broad. For instance, it is not meant to rely on any assumptions about what exactly the status of correctness itself is in normative theory – as opposed to, say, correctness for descriptive questions in the natural sciences. It is also meant not to rely on any assumptions about the nature of normative facts – for instance, whether or not they are only facts in some minimal or deflationary sense (e.g., the sense endorsed by many contemporary expressivists). What I have so far about normative inquiry is thus something that I think can and should be taken on board by a whole range of philosophers – including, for instance, expressivists and fictionalists about normative thought and talk. As long as there is some sense in which we think our normative views about a given topic can more or less succeed at getting it right, then there is the notion of correctness that I am interested in here. Anyone who thinks that those engaged in normative inquiry are studying a subject matter that one can have more or less an understanding of therefore accepts some version of the notion of correctness I have in mind. And, in turn, we can just think of normative facts – whatever more precisely they are – as those things that we are trying to learn about in normative inquiry, in order to have a more correct grasp of the subject matter of that inquiry. For now, this is all that we will need. For once we have this thesis in hand, then, based on my basic reflections on the case of Helen earlier, I submit that we have good support for the following thesis: some concepts are more apt for use in normative inquiry than others, and we should use those available ones that are most apt. The normative case, in other words, is on all fours here with respect to the biological case – biological inquiry might differ in significant ways from normative inquiry, but not in any respects that matter for establishing the idea that some concepts are more apt for engaging in such inquiry than others.

---

17 See, for instance, (Gibbard 2003). For helpful discussion of this issue, see (Dreier 2004).
18 It should be flagged up front that some philosophers reject the claim that there are normative facts (even in the very minimal sense I have sketched here). For now, what I want to say is this: thinking that there is some legitimate subject matter for normative inquiry is likely a precondition for being engaged in normative inquiry as such. Thus, by starting with the assumption that there are normative facts (in the minimal sense I have sketched here), what we are essentially starting with is the (defeasible) working assumption that there is a legitimate subject matter for normative inquiry to study.
To illustrate this idea, consider the following case. In her paper “What is a Child?”, Tamar Schapiro asks the question posed in the paper’s title: namely, “what is a child?”. In asking this question, Schapiro isn’t trying to ask a straightforward biological question. She already knows roughly what children are, according to a biological definition of the term “child”. What she is interested in is rather a question internal to moral theory. Schapiro begins with the idea that we can (and should) give certain moral explanations that make reference to the status of an individual as a child, and wants to know what it is to be a child in this sense relevant to moral theory when we give such explanations. We can reconstruct one of Schapiro’s basic thoughts here as follows: for the purposes of doing moral theory, certain concepts are going to be more apt for this project than others, and we want to use those concepts that are most suited to the this project, and then figure out the nature of those things that fall under those concepts, rather than a set of concepts that we import from somewhere else (e.g., from biology). Perhaps certain biological concepts will turn out to be the ones that we should also use in moral theory, but that should not be assumed from the start to be the case simply because the biological concepts are helpful for giving biological explanations. What matters, ultimately, is whether these concepts pull their weight in moral explanations. Or, put another way, what ultimately matters here is the extent to which these concepts are apt for carrying out the central research aim of moral theory: namely, discovering the moral facts. In more general terms, we might say this: when doing biology, we should use those concepts that help us learn about the biological facts – which, among other things, will (at least arguably) be ones that help us cut at the biological joints. When doing normative ethics, we should use those concepts that help us learn about the ethical facts – which, among other things, will (at least arguably) be ones that help us cut at the ethical joints.

An important point about conceptual ethics before moving. In this section, I have characterized the constitutive aim of research activity as follows: it is to learn about the correct theory of a given subject matter. Or, put another way, the aim is to learn about a relevant set of facts (which, keep in mind, might get a fully minimalist gloss in our final account of the metaphysics of those facts). On this way of thinking about things, the constitutive norms (or values) that matter for research activity are essentially epistemic ones. In the next two sections (§2 and 3), I will work under the simplifying pretense that it is only such norms that matter for determining which concepts are apt to use in research activity. I

19 (Schapiro 1999).
will complicate this picture in §4. In that section, I will suggest that non-epistemic standards – such as, for instance, moral standards about such things as social justice or human flourishing – arguably also play a role in determining facts about the relative aptness of concepts (for a given individual, in a given context). But, for now, in what I want to do is start with the idea that, if we want to know how apt a concept is for use in a form of (legitimate, substantive) inquiry, all that we need to know is the extent to which that concepts helps facilitate the internal epistemic goals of that inquiry. Even if these sorts of epistemic norms that I will focus on aren’t the only sorts of things that will ultimately matter for settling the all-things-considered questions in conceptual ethics, they will certainly be things that matter a lot – or, more precisely, they will insofar as we think the relevant inquiry is a legitimate and substantive branch of inquiry that the relevant agent has normative reason to engage in. So it is, I claim, a solid place to start wondering about the relevance of conceptual history to normative inquiry. We can ask: can conceptual history help us figure out which concepts are more or less helpful for learning about the normative facts? In the next two sections, I argue that the answer here is yes.


In the last section, I introduced the idea of conceptual ethics, and then argued for the following claim within conceptual ethics: some concepts are more apt for use in normative inquiry than others, and we should use those available ones that are most apt. One of the most important ways in which conceptual history matters to normative inquiry – the way that is my main focus in this paper – is that studying conceptual history can help us in conceptual ethics. I think this point is quite general, and applies to a wide range of different types of inquiry. But my goal here in what follows will be to make this case for normative inquiry in particular. That is: I will argue that. It is crucial to keep in mind in what follows that, on the view that I am advancing, conceptual history does not settle our normative questions for us.\(^{20}\) My view, rather, is that conceptual history can help us make

\(^{20}\) Unless one has a highly unorthodox account of normative facts (where, for instance, they are grounded in or reduced to descriptive facts of conceptual history), facts of conceptual history are only going to be a helpful piece of information to learn about while trying to uncover the normative facts. And I am not endorsing any such view of normative facts in this paper – nor, for the record, do I think we should. One way of reading the view of normativity in (Brandom 1994) is that he endorses such a view, roughly, the view that what normative inquiry is the attempt to tell effective stories that involve a rational reconstruction of the history of our use of concepts.
progress in figuring out which concepts we should use while doing normative inquiry by providing descriptive information that is relevant to normative inquiry. I start here by showing a basic way in which conceptual history can matter to conceptual ethics.

When I introduced the idea of conceptual history at the start of this paper, I claimed that it involved two kinds of descriptive fact: a) descriptive facts about how, when, or why a given concept (or a set of concepts) first emerged in use and b) descriptive facts about what people have done with a given concept or set of concepts after this emergence. Call the first kind of fact emergence facts about a concept or set of concepts, and call the second kind of fact past use facts about a concept or set of concepts. In what follows, I will address the potential relevance of both kinds of fact within conceptual history to conceptual ethics. This section (§2) and the following one (§3) focus on how conceptual history can help us with questions about the epistemic fruitfulness of different concepts in normative inquiry – roughly, with in what way employing different concepts can help us learn about the normative facts. In §4, I will turn to non-epistemic norms and values that can matter in conceptual ethics, and explain how conceptual history can be relevant there too.

Let’s start with emergence facts. Consider here Raymond Geuss’s work in such books as *History and Illusion in Politics* and *Public Goods, Private Goods.* Geuss argues that many of the core concepts we use in contemporary politics – such as the concepts of PRIVATE and PUBLIC – were first brought into use by grafting together previous, somewhat disparate concepts in a hodge-podge sort of way given contingent historical pressures that we have now forgotten. In short, Geuss contends that what we now think of as the public/private distinction can be seen as the result of combining into one category at least three different separate distinctions that were once used in antiquity. Moreover, Geuss contends that the reason for this switch was not because it was somehow responsive to some actual (normative or descriptive) division in the world that this concept was now “carving at its joints”, but rather because of contingent historical pressures about social norms that had nothing to do with better tracking the normative facts, or any normatively relevant part of non-normative reality. Geuss argues that the result of this is that the concepts we are left with have application-conditions that ask for many different things at once – some of which might not be capable of being held together simultaneously and which, in any case, mean

---

21 See (Geuss 2001a) and (Geuss 2001b).
22 (Geuss 2001b).
that the concept ends up tracking an unhelpful property to worry about given the role we want (and should want) the concept to play in our theorizing and practice.

Suppose that Geuss turned out to be correct about the emergence facts about our concepts of PUBLIC and PRIVATE that we use in contemporary politics. By itself, these emergence facts might not tell us that the concept is in fact a bad one to use. For it could be that even though the concept was initially brought into use for causal-explanatory reasons that had little or even nothing to do with tracking the normative truth, they might still be helpful for doing so. In short, the concepts could have come into use for any number of reasons, but still be good at playing the functional role of helping to track the normative truth in the social/political domain. To think otherwise is to confuse historical facts about why a concept first emerged in practice with facts about what role a concept currently plays. To put it another way, to think emergence facts by themselves necessitate a conclusion about the current role of a concept is to commit a version of the genetic fallacy. For instance, it is akin to thinking that because a chocolate cake was baked with the intention of killing someone with a chocolate allergy then that is how that cake must now be used in practice. Or, vice versa, it is akin to thinking that because the chocolate cake was baked with the intention of tasting delicious, then it can only be used in this way now.

There is no doubt that appeal to emergence facts can fall prey to the genetic fallacy if one is not careful. However, this does not have to be the case. And, indeed, charges of the genetic fallacy might often serve the function of covering up the very real normative issues that emergence facts can bring up. For even if emergence facts about X cannot by themselves establish X’s current functional role, they can be at least a helpful (albeit defeasible) indicator about this role. Moreover, our warrant for using certain concepts in the present might have much to do with the story of how we acquired those concepts (just as our warrant for holding certain beliefs might have much to do with the history of how we came to acquire those beliefs).

Consider, for instance, what we might think of as a vindicatory history about QUARK that we might discover: namely, that it was brought into use solely as the result of top scientists realizing that we need such a concept to properly explain the world. Contrast this with what we might think of as undermining history about QUARK: namely, that it was first

23 Read charitably, this might be the basic strand of truth in Ian Hacking’s claim that charges of the genetic fallacy usually amount to “insubstantial name-calling” (Hacking 2002, 63).
brought into use because a famous scientist was trying to secure grant money with a funny sounding new word. If we are using the concept QUARK now, such stories can shake our confidence – not because they tell us how the concept must in fact be used now, but because they suggest likely ways in which it is in fact being used as well as, moreover, tell us something important about what we can (and cannot) say about our warrant for using a given concept. For instance, if a scientific concept was brought into use solely in order to secure grant money, it might just happen to be randomly lucky and subsequently latch onto the world in a way it is conducive to scientific discovery, but, given the vast array of concepts that one might use, the lack of any initial good epistemic reason for using the concept gives us good pro tanto reason to doubt that this is so, as well as reason to doubt we are warranted in using the concept in question. Indeed, it might not only give us reason to doubt that we are warranted in using the concept in question but in fact be a defeater that makes us unwarranted in thinking this way. This is connected to the fact that similarly to how we justify many of our beliefs that P on the grounds that P itself was part of the causal-explanatory story about why we believe P, so too do we implicitly justify the use of some of our concepts on whether or not the property they pick out is part of the causal-explanatory story for why we started using that concept – e.g., as in the vindicatory story about QUARK.

To return to the case of Geuss’s work in political philosophy, it seems reasonable to hold that uncovering the emergence facts can indeed make us skeptical that our concepts really are the best ones to use. For if our concepts were not initially acquired because they helped better capture the subject matter at hand, then this serves to undercut one indicator (albeit a defeasible one) that the concept PUBLIC and PRIVATE really are the best ones to use to learn about and understand the normative facts in the social/political domain. Moreover, insofar as Geuss’s work suggests that many of our current concepts in contemporary political discourse are roughly on par with such concepts in terms of their history, Geuss’s historical work can serve the function of making us wonder if new concepts that have been brought into use since these concepts really have had a different sort of history about why we have acquired them.

To appreciate the import of this point, consider recent work from the history of science that suggests that what we think of as important historical scientific discoveries were much more influenced by concerns of social power and prestige than we normally assume by default. For instance, in Galileo, Courtier, Mario Biagioli argues that concerns of patronage
drove much more of Galileo’s work in science than is normally assumed – and, indeed, that many of his scientific positions were crafted in such a way precisely to help play the functional role of helping him secure patronage. Insofar as we see the concepts that we use in our current scientific practices as the historical outgrowth of Galileo’s work, such historical charges are of more than just mere historical interest in the past: rather, they can also serve the function of making us wonder just how different the status of our current scientific concepts really is. Indeed, if it could be shown that the emergence facts of many scientific positions were much like those that Biagioli argues was the case for Galileo’s concepts, or, more precisely, that the emergence facts about many scientific concepts result from much the same process, this would give us good reason to think that our own current scientific positions (or concepts) might be in a similar boat.

What this all means, I take it, is that conceptual history about emergence facts can be important in our thinking about the question of which concepts are better or worse to use in a given inquiry, including normative inquiry, given the subject matter that the inquiry is concerned with. This is not to say that discovering historical accounts that shake our confidence in the value of our current concepts will be easy. One point here worth emphasizing is that historical events normally have multiple causes – for instance, it is likely that many people engage in certain scientific studies both because they want to gain grant money and because they are concerned with finding the scientific truth. The ideal type of an undermining story about the initial use of a concept is one in which the only cause of a concept starting to be used is one that had nothing to do with better understanding the subject matter at hand. Studies in the history of science such as Biagioli’s show, if correct, that social/psychological facts that are intuitively irrelevant to tracking scientific facts are part of the explanatory story for the emergence of certain scientific theories, as well as likely for the initial emergence of certain scientific concepts. But it is doubtful that the mere presence of irrelevant influences in the explanatory account should be enough to shake our confidence. A stronger story – and one that itself might still not be enough to warrant undermining our confidence in the value of a given concept – would be one that involved explanatory elimination of any facts that we think would serve as a vindication. Such stories are harder ones to prove. More generally, given how massively complicated historical events are, and given the types of creatures we are, we are in a difficult epistemic position with respect to actually being able to

---

24 (Biagioli 1993).
show that de-bunking explanations of concept emergence are true. We should have, to say the least, some serious epistemic humility with respect to getting epistemic access to the complete explanation for historical events.

What then of past use facts? Here, I think the case is even more straightforward. In general, in assessing whether a tool is a good one for a specific task at hand, one of the main things we have to go on is how that tool has performed in the past. For instance, if I am wondering whether it is better to make a nail go into a table by using a hammer or tweezers, one of the things we rely on is knowledge about how the tools have been used in the past, which, often, includes facts about how they have been more-or-less successfully used. In this case, given that hammers (in contrast to tweezers) have in the past been successfully used to hammer nails into tables gives me good reason for thinking that this is one way in which hammers can be successfully used now.

This, of course, is not to say that such past facts are definitive for our views on which tools are good to use. For you might show up at my house with a tool that I have never seen before at all and it might nonetheless be good for the task at hand – for instance, you might bring over a state-of-the-art electric drill that I don’t even initially recognize as a drill in order to help drill holes into my wall. Or, similarly, the conditions might have changed enough from the past such that a once-effective tool no longer is effective at all – for instance, the nail that I might be trying to hammer into the table might be so tiny that tweezers would actually be the better tool to use. Or, to take another example still, we might very well decide to put a tool to new use – for instance, using guns that have in the past been used to kill people to make activist artwork with the aim of promoting world peace. Such examples underscore that just as we can fall prey to a genetic fallacy by conflating facts about something’s emergence in use with facts about current use, so too can we fall prey to a version of it simply by assuming that facts about past use are also definitive about current use. Yet, even if facts about what has been done with a tool in the past are not definitive for our views about how helpful that tool will now be in the present, the lesson from our initial discussion from our hammer is that facts about the past uses of a tool are patently one such fact that we rely on in forming our views on this topic.

If we think of concepts as tools for helping us think and learn about a certain subject matter, then the same basic thinking about the past use of tools should carry over to our basic view of the import of past use facts about concepts. And, indeed, I think this is
precisely what we see all the time in how we assess which concepts are better or worse to use. For instance, if I am working in physics, part of the reason that I employ the concept QUARK is because of my belief that this concept has successfully been used to understand physical reality in the past by others working in my field. Similarly, in political philosophy, part of the reason that I currently employ concepts such as DEMOCRACY or THE STATE is because of my belief that others before me have used such concepts as part of effectively addressing normative social/political questions in the past. In other words, even if we can and often do start employing new concepts in our thinking (such as when scientists first started using the concept QUARK or when political philosophers first started using the concept of STATE OF NATURE) we use most of the concepts that we do because of the fact that others have used them before us in ways that we think are productive. Indeed, if the concepts we are using are genuinely new ones (for instance, as would be the case on certain fine-grained criteria for concept individuation), it is likely that they are closely related to those that preceded them (such that one might usefully speak, perhaps metaphorically, in terms of some of the these concepts being “modifications” of the previous concepts).

Insofar as we are reflective about which concepts we are using, and we then think we are justified in using such-and-such specific concepts in our thinking, part of the reason is because we think that our concepts (or closely related ones) have in fact been helpful at gaining epistemic access to the relevant facts in the past. Conceptual history about past use facts can help uncover whether or not such beliefs are in fact justified or true.

At this juncture, I want to flag here a particular radical way in which conceptual history might matter to our view of what concepts to use in normative inquiry given what I have said so far. Suppose we discover that a group of concepts emerged for reasons that had nothing to do with tracking the normative facts, or that the functional role that those concepts have since played has not been at all conducive to helping us better grasp the normative facts. Nietzsche is plausibly read as holding that one or both of these claims is true of the specifically moral concepts (or at least a set of moral concepts that was prevalent during his time). As I glossed at the start of this paper, on one way of reading Nietzsche, the specifically moral concepts emerged as part of an attempt by some to seek vengeance on others, rather than because of tracking the normative facts, and those concepts have since served to legitimate an order that stifles human flourishing instead of helping us better grasp any important facts. If such a story is right, it might give us reason to doubt that there is in
fact a legitimate subject matter that those moral concepts are in fact helping us understand. Indeed, if such a story is right, it might lead us to suspect that the concepts in question (namely, the moral concepts) aren’t really helpful tools for understanding a subject matter at all, but rather essentially ideological tools of legitimation. If that radical conclusion is right, this would give us reason to stop using those concepts and seek other ones to use instead when engaged in normative inquiry.

The broadly Nietzschean-style story here, of course, becomes more radical the more normative concepts it is used to cover. On the most radical end of the spectrum, one might seek to push it to cover all normative concepts – including those we use in epistemology, the parts of ethics outside of morality (parts that Nietzsche himself seems to be relying on when he advocates views of human flourishing), or the philosophy of science. If so, this could lead us to be skeptical that there are is a legitimate subject matter for any normative inquiry to be about in the first place. I doubt that the conceptual history is actually such that we should be skeptical of normative inquiry across the board in this way (let alone for the specifically moral concepts). However, given the framework that I have set up in this section, it is certainly intelligible how such a story (either about the moral concepts in particular, or all normative concepts) could prove to be quite attractive if the actual facts of conceptual history turned out a certain way. Is something like the Nietzschean story true? I myself doubt it. But I also think this: whether it is true or not depends in part on what the facts of conceptual history here actually are.

§3. Conceptual Analysis, Conceptual Ethics, and Conceptual History.

In the last section §2, I made the basic case for how looking at conceptual history can help us gain a better grip on what concepts can help us best learn about the normative facts. In this section, I now want to turn to another, more indirect, way in which conceptual history can help us on this front. This is as follows: doing conceptual analysis can sometimes be helpful to doing normative inquiry, and conceptual history can sometimes be helpful to doing conceptual analysis. As a reminder to the reader: in this section (§3), keep in mind that, as with §2, the sorts of norms that I will take to matter in conceptual ethics are epistemic ones.

§ 3.1 Conceptual Analysis and Normative Inquiry.
Let’s start with the idea that doing conceptual analysis can sometimes be helpful in doing normative inquiry (including by being helpful to conceptual ethics). There is a basic sense in which concepts are tools – tools that we use for thinking certain thoughts rather than others, and which can thus help us in our various projects (e.g., studying biology, or cooking a meal for a dinner party). One way in which someone can be bad at using a tool is that they lack the skills to effectively use it – for instance, one might be clumsy at using a hammer. One way to lack skill at using a tool is by lacking theoretical knowledge about what a tool is, such that this lack of theoretical knowledge hinders one’s ability to make practical use of the tool. For instance, one might not even recognize that a hammer is the sort of tool that can be used to bang nails into wood. If so, then one’s lack of a theoretical grip on what sorts of things hammers are and what they can effectively be used for hinders one’s practical ability to use them effectively to bang nails into woods.

Let’s return to concepts. If we think of concepts as epistemic tools in the way that I have been proposing, then, on this basic schema, we can think of agents having or more or less of an understanding of the content of the specific concepts they are using. How well one understands the concepts that one is actually using – or, further, those that one might use - can matter for doing conceptual ethics.

To better understand what’s at issue here, let me start by saying that we do not always need perfect epistemic access to the content of a concept in order to effectively discern what falls under that concept. For instance, I might not know exactly what the content of my concept SPECIES is and nonetheless be very good at identifying different species in normal circumstances. Similarly, I might not know exactly what it takes to fall under the concept KANGAROO but be quite good at identifying kangaroos in normal circumstances. Indeed, I might completely lack any explicit theory of the application-conditions for the concept KANGAROO and still nonetheless be quite good in normal circumstances at figuring out which things are kangaroos are which things are not. To put it one way, we might say this: much of the time, for the purposes of figuring out what falls under one’s concepts, it does not matter that what concepts one is using is a fact that is left largely implicit in one’s practices and the content of those concepts is left largely unarticulated in any specific theory about their content.

In some cases, however, our lack of theoretical understanding of our concepts can hurt our ability to use them in inquiry. This is because even if one does not need immediate
or flawless access to the content of one’s concepts in order to be able to effectively use them, one does needs at least sufficient understanding of how they represent in order to do so. One type of issue about concepts then is whether or not a subject has a sufficient grasp of the content of the concepts she is using. (Or to put it another way, a way that is equivalent if we individuate concepts by their precise role in thought, the issue here of whether or not a subject has a sufficient grasp of which specific concepts she actually is using.) Following one basic usage of the term “conceptual analysis” in contemporary philosophy (a usage I employed earlier in this paper), we can call the project of figuring out what the content of a given concept is — regardless of the specific methodology by which one pursues this project — the project of conceptual analysis. Using this terminology, we can thus say that a way in which conceptual analysis matters to conceptual ethics is the question of whether or not one has done enough conceptual analysis on the concepts that one is using. Or, to put it another way, the issue is whether or not one’s concepts have been sufficiently analyzed.

In fact, this question is just as important — if not more important — for questions about concepts that one is not currently be using. To return to our earlier example of the hammer. Suppose Dustin is using a jagged and crumbling rock to try to bang nails into a piece of wood. He would likely do better by using a hammer instead. Suppose there is a hammer somewhere nearby Dustin in the room where he is using the rock this way. Before Dustin will actually start to use the hammer, he needs a sufficient theoretical grip on what hammers are and how they can be used. At the very least, he needs to recognize that the hammer is there. By analogy: what can matter to us in conceptual ethics is thus not just whether our own concepts have been sufficiently analyzed, but whether other relevant ones are. Conceptual analysis can help on these fronts — whether for the concepts (normative or descriptive) that we use in normative inquiry, or inquiry of any other sort.

Before moving on, let me be clear about the sort of role that I am here putting forward for conceptual analysis in normative inquiry, and what role I am not. Given the basic account I am working with of what concepts are — i.e., that they are constituent components of our thoughts that, roughly, allow a subject to think one sort of thought

25 The term “conceptual analysis” is sometimes used in a narrow sense to refer to a part of a specific given philosophical program — say, for instance, as a component of early to mid-twentieth-century British philosophy. I do not intend to use the term that way. As I understand it, conceptual analysis is the project of trying to understand the content of concepts however the methodology and metaphysics for this is understood.
rather than another – conceptual analysis cannot by itself tell us anything about the way the world actually is. Rather, it tells us about the content of certain thoughts that we think – e.g., for concepts that are defined in terms of their representational role, it tells us how we represent the world as being when we think a certain thought. Therefore, whatever it reveals about the content of these concepts, conceptual analysis alone – whether using the tool of conceptual history or not – can’t tell us the answers to our normative questions. It can’t tell us how to live, what to believe, or how to proceed in the natural sciences. To answer those questions, we need to engage in substantive normative inquiry, inquiry that goes beyond conceptual analysis.

But, in helping us get clear about content of our concepts, conceptual analysis can help us proceed with sharpened tools in normative inquiry. A successful conceptual analysis of WELL-BEING, for instance, can help us better understand what it would be to promote someone’s well-being and thus what standard to use to evaluate different substantive theories of well-being. If tracking facts about well-being (the facts that fall under this concept WELL-BEING) matters in normative ethics and political philosophy, then this conceptual analysis can help. From another angle, a successful analysis of a concept can also make it more or less clear how useful that concept is for the purposes at hand. For instance, consider the folk concept of FREE WILL. In From Metaphysics to Ethics, Jackson argues that the correct analysis of the folk concept is an incompatibilist one according to which free will requires the exercise of something akin to so-called “agent-causation” that is not itself caused by any previous events. At best, he thinks, this concept is nowhere instantiated in the actual world. And, at worst, he holds that it might require things that are literally metaphysically impossible such that it is not instantiated in any possible world. By understanding this through conceptual analysis, we can thus come to appreciate the need to find another concept to play a similar functional role in thought and practice about moral, legal, and political responsibility – say, for instance, a concept along the lines discussed by compatibilists. Less drastically, we can imagine that, through doing conceptual analysis on a concept such as HAPPINESS that we routinely use in political thought, we come to discover that the concept actually has different content then we think – thereby putting us in a better position to assess if this is really the concept we should be using at all.

26 (Jackson 1998).
27 (Jackson 1998, 56).
§ 3.2. The Role of Conceptual History in Conceptual Analysis.

The standard methodology for doing conceptual analysis within much of contemporary philosophy investigates how things are with us now, e.g. by paying attention to the details of how we are disposed to respond to both actual and possible scenarios. This includes, for instance, giving thought experiments and figuring out what we are disposed to say about them. Given the broad understanding of what concepts are that I am working with in this paper, we do not have good reason to reject the view that it is *in principle* possible to grasp the content of a concept solely through this sort of method. If one wants to reject it, one owes a further story about the nature of concepts that would explain why this method is flawed – and I do not want to take on that sort of claim here in this paper, for the reasons I canvassed in the introduction.\(^\text{28}\) But even if the method of thought experiment is helpful for doing conceptual analysis, this does not mean that conceptual analysis should limit itself *in practice* to a set number of tools for gaining epistemic access to conceptual content. So if conceptual history can help as part of the project of conceptual analysis – even if does so by departing from the standard methodology – then it should be taken on board as part of the toolkit for doing conceptual analysis. So, the main question that we need to ask ourselves here is not whether the use of conceptual history in conceptual analysis departs from the standard methodology of conceptual analysis, but rather whether or not conceptual history can aid in the project of conceptual analysis. I will argue that it can, in at least two different ways.

The first way that conceptual history can help in conceptual analysis stems from the fact that one helpful method by which to discover what the content of a given concept \(C\) is to see how the application-conditions of \(C\) are contrasted with other nearby or related concepts. For instance, one way to get clearer about the concept **KNOWLEDGE** is to appreciate how it is different than the concept **JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF**. To put it one way – a way that resonates with the basic way Frank Jackson puts it in *From Metaphysics to Ethics* – what matters here is how representing things one way (the way that one does when one uses

\(^{28}\) Full disclosure: I also think there is a lot to be gained from this sort of classic method of conceptual analysis. But – in the context of this paper – that isn’t the main reason here that I am not wanting to reject it. The main reason has to do with the sort of philosophical inclusiveness that this paper aims at, which I am pursuing for the reasons I gave in the introduction.
the concept KNOWLEDGE) is different than another (the way that one does when one uses the concept JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF). If we situate a concept’s use in historical perspective, this might help bring out which concepts this particular concept can be usefully contrasted with for the purposes of analysis. For instance, when looking at a scientific concept such as MASS, it will often be very useful for purposes of conceptual analysis to know how, why, and when a concept first began to be used in scientific practice and what has been done with it in the past. By looking at the actual emergence facts here, one can come to get a better grip on whether the concept superseded/replaced a previous concept, involved the modification of a previous concept, or something else. In turn, this can help us get clear about what we should expect to find out about the concept under consideration (e.g. MASS).

On this front, consider Daston and Galison’s work on the history of the modern concept OBJECTIVITY that is operative in the natural sciences. In looking at this history in their book Objectivity, a history that they themselves put in terms of a history of the concept OBJECTIVITY, Daston and Galison argue that modern scientific practice is regulated by at least three distinct concepts that have served as ethico-epistemic virtues for organizing scientific practice: what they call “truth-to-nature”, “mechanical objectivity”, and “trained judgment”. By contrasting OBJECTIVITY with other concepts that have played similar functional roles in scientific thought and practice, Daston and Galison’s work brings into focus a number of particular features of this concept that we might, without the history, just associate with scientific inquiry itself. For instance, it brings into focus the fact that, if one’s basic goal is to produce a correct representation of the world, this by no means needs to entail a representation that bears as little trace as possible of the person making the representation. That is a virtue associated with objectivity, but not one associated with trained judgment. Similarly, their history brings into focus how the concept OBJECTIVITY is tied to a certain historically specific view of the scientific self as something capable of interfering with scientific knowledge in particular ways – ways which, in short, would simply not make much sense to worry about according to previous ways of conceiving of the scientific self. Perhaps we might be able to see these facts without doing conceptual history. Yet, I see no reason to deny that conceptual history can – and, indeed, sometimes does – help us better understand conceptual content in this way.

29 (Daston and Galison 2007).
The second way in which conceptual history can help in conceptual analysis stems from the fact that, in many cases, the causal-explanatory reasons why agents started using a concept in the first place have to do with historically specific problems that we have now forgotten. By understanding these historical pressures that acted on the concept’s initial emergence and use, we might come to appreciate parts of a concept’s content that we might not be able to readily see otherwise. This is a point emphasized by, among others, Ian Hacking and Arnold Davidson. To illustrate the point, consider here again Geuss’s work on the public/private distinction. From our current position, we might very well be able to tell that the concepts PUBLIC and PRIVATE are opaque and murky in certain ways. By looking at the emergence facts about these concepts, we can come to better appreciate what forces made it such that we started to use these specific concepts. Understanding these forces can help make clear why the concepts have certain strange features to their content that would not make straightforward logical sense given the subject matter at hand – but, which, once we understand how and why these concepts started to be used for historically specific reasons, these features no longer seem unexpected. The take home message for the aspiring conceptual analyst here is this: awareness of such historical facts can help us be attuned to aspects to a concept's content that we might otherwise overlook or fail to adequately appreciate.

This, then, gives us two different ways in which conceptual history can help aid in the project of conceptual analysis – and thereby help sharpen our understanding of concepts to a level that is sufficient for different projects we are engaged in. I earlier explained how this can be useful for the task of normative inquiry. Let me canvass one last way.

Recall that when I introduced how conceptual analysis can be relevant to conceptual ethics, I claimed that what was important was not only how doing conceptual analysis on those concepts that we in fact do use, but also ones that we might. I want to focus on a particular mechanism by which conceptual history is able to help us in this regard. Part of the possibility for conceptual history playing a role in helping us with the question of which concepts one should use depends on our recognition that a concept other than our own that could potentially play the same (or similar) functional role in our practices that ours does. Hence, I think that showing the use of such other concepts in history should itself be thought of as one of the key contributions that conceptual history can make. In showing

30 See (Hacking 2002) and (Davidson 2001).
how others in history used certain concepts to play a functional role now played for us by a new concept, conceptual history can show that our use of a given concept cannot be treated as inevitable or required. In other words, it can de-naturalize our use of a concept that we (perhaps unconsciously) take to be the only one that we could possibly be using to play a given functional role in our thought or practice. This is part of the force of, for instance, much of Foucault and Davidson’s work on sexuality, as well as, in a different theoretical vein, work done by such historians of political thought as Quentin Skinner and Richard Tuck.\(^{31}\)

That being said, I think it is important to proceed here with caution. One might tell an advanced physicist that a lot of people in the world have views on physics much different than her own. Yet this sheer diversity of views should not give her much pause – nor should the fact that most people remain stuck using folk concepts of physics rather than those provided by the best current work in physics. After all, a lot of people have mistaken views in physics and, moreover, fail to use the concepts that best respond to the joints in nature. This is especially true when one thinks about views in physics that people have had throughout history. Thus, showing someone that there are a diversity of concepts that one might use for the same role (e.g., such-and-such role in regulating our sexual practices) is, in principle, not necessarily any different than showing the physicist the data about the diversity of views that people have in physics.

If this is so, then, when addressing the normative question of what concept to use for a certain functional role in our current practices, we should not be primarily concerned which concept has always played the role (if any has), but rather which concept we have most normative reason to employ.

Thus, looking at the conceptual history should only put pressure on us to actually consider thinking otherwise not just when it shows the possibility of thinking otherwise, but when it casts relief on our current views about what concepts we have most reason to employ. In other words, from a normative perspective, what is going to be important here is not just that we discover that there is a choice about what concepts to use that we perhaps did not previously see. Rather, what is going to be important is that we discover that this choice exists and that it is a choice that is worth deliberating about seriously. This can happen, for instance, when looking at conceptual history furnishes us with a range of

\(^{31}\) See (Foucault 1978), (Davidson 2001), (Skinner 1978), and (Tuck 1993).
alternative concepts that we weren’t paying attention to beforehand, but which we have normative reason to take seriously as alternatives once we are presented with these concepts and the reasons why others have used these concepts before us.

This now brings me to the close of my main argument in this section. If what I have argued in this sub-section (§3.2) is on the right track, then it follows that conceptual history can (at least sometimes) aid in the project of conceptual analysis. And if my claim (in §3.1) that conceptual analysis can help in doing normative inquiry is correct, then it follows that conceptual history can help us in normative inquiry partly because of the way in which it can help us in conceptual analysis. This is the main claim that I set out to establish in this section.

Before moving on, it is important to be clear here about what role I have claimed conceptual history can play in conceptual analysis. A strong thesis that one might have is that the only way to successfully accomplish conceptual analysis, in all cases, for all concepts, involves looking at certain facts of conceptual history. I have made no such claim. Instead, all that I have claimed is that doing conceptual history can sometimes help in the project of conceptual analysis; not that it always can, and certainly not that it is something necessary to engage in in order to successfully carry out a conceptual analysis of any given concept. There might be certain concepts – or certain epistemic situations we find ourselves in – that make conceptual history particularly relevant to conceptual analysis. But that is the topic of another discussion.

§4. Practical Concerns about an Inquiry.

In this paper so far, I have been working with the idea that the sorts of norms (or, similarly, values) that matter for determining the normative facts in conceptual ethics are broadly epistemic ones – they are ones, roughly, that have to do with helping us better understand some domain of facts (biological, ethical, etc.). These sorts of norms are certainly some of the norms that matter here in conceptual ethics. But, crucially, it isn’t obvious that these are the only kinds of norms that matter. Whether that is so is a substantive question within conceptual ethics. And, crucially, the fact that there might indeed be fundamentally non-epistemic norms that matter here in conceptual ethics is particularly important when thinking about the relevance of conceptual history to conceptual ethics (including, but not limited to, the conceptual ethics of normative inquiry).
To see why this is so, consider the following case. Larry is a biologist who wants to discover how long human beings can survive without water and he carries out his inquiry by denying five thousand different human subjects water until they die. This might be a very effective method for answering the question he started with. It would also, however, be a morally objectionable study that involved five thousand deaths. Thus, even if the study was a good one for pursuing the constitutive aim of Larry’s inquiry, there would nonetheless be reason to think that this study was problematic in another important respect. This case brings out that we worry about the tools we use not just in terms of what epistemic results they bring us, or how apt they are for our epistemic aims, but also in terms of what other practical effects wielding those tools has in the wider world. Larry’s inquiry might turn out to be entirely correct about how long people can survive without water, but there is another serious concern here – his inquiry is an unethical one.

This points to another issue involving the concepts one uses in normative theory: namely, how their use is tied to actual practical effects in the world. This shouldn’t be surprising. The use of certain concepts is a form of behavior, and we can (and I think should) assess that behavior in ethical, and not just epistemic terms.

To begin to see how such issues could arise, imagine that Boris is a mathematician working on geometry. Now suppose that Boris has a strange psychological constitution that results in the following: every time that Boris uses the concept CIRCLE to represent how things are, this causes him to immediately kick whatever is standing in front of him – including, for instance, students and other mathematicians. This fact would not in any way indicate that Boris should not use the concept CIRCLE if his only goal was to understand geometry. It nonetheless raises an important set of practical issues about using this concept. These issues might be relatively unimportant if Boris only ever stood in front of pillows. However, they might be much more serious if Boris were to teach math in an elementary school or if found himself locked up in a top-secret military room at the pentagon with buttons that trigger launching nuclear weapons.

Even if we lack characteristics as quirky as Boris’s, it might nonetheless be the case that many of us have tendencies that are tied to our use of specific concepts in practice. For example, to return to the domain of political philosophy, consider the charge that when human beings understand the world as “disenchanted” this leads to environmental destruction, despair, or nihilism. Or, similarly, consider the charge that when we employ
individualist concepts of identity in our political thinking, this strips our lives of meaning in practice. Or, finally, consider the familiar thought that even if utilitarianism is correct as a normative theory, explicitly employing utilitarian reasoning as a decision-procedure leads to bad results according to utilitarianism’s own standard of value. Even if one disagrees with such positions, we nonetheless know how to make sense of them and see them as potentially important. In short, what they point to is that, perhaps because of psychological facts, or perhaps because of other facts about how the world is, employing certain concepts in practice in-such-and-such way (e.g., by our using these concepts to form beliefs about a certain subject matter) can be tied to better or worse practical effects. And, at least prima facie, this seems like it could be precisely the sort of thing that matters in settling which concepts one should use. Based on this, there is good reason that one might adopt the following position in conceptual ethics: part of what determines the all-things-considered question of what concepts an agent A should use in circumstances C, are facts about practical effects the use of those concepts is tied to in practice.

With this idea in hand, let’s return to conceptual history. As I emphasized in my earlier discussion of the genetic fallacy, facts about how a concept was first acquired or used in the past do not themselves entail any facts about how the concept must necessarily be used in the present. This is again important to remember in this category of issues involving concepts as well. Put succinctly, there can be good things that came into the world for bad reasons or which have been used to do bad things in the past. And vice versa. Just as this is true with material items in the world – e.g. metal that was originally manufactured for bombs could subsequently be used for a solar car – so too is it true of concepts. For instance, a concept like UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS might have been traditionally used in a way that masked the objectionable imposition of a way of life on less powerful groups. Yet, this does not tell us that this is how this concept is always used now or about how it must be used in the future.

Nonetheless, even if conceptual history can’t tell us how a concept must be used or evaluated now in the present, it can help provide us clues to how it might or likely be used.

---

32 This sort of critique is one strand of the later Heidegger’s work, as in (Heidegger 1993). It is also one important strand of the communitarian critique of liberalism in political philosophy, as in (Sandel 1998).
In order to see how this is so, consider again the distinction between emergence facts and past use facts about a concept (or, on a related note, a group of nearby or related concepts).

Let’s start with emergence facts. Consider here again Nietzsche’s work in *On The Genealogy of Morals*. If Nietzsche is correct, then the reason why people first started using certain moral concepts did not primarily have to do with tracking anything such as an important truth about the world, but rather (very roughly) as a way in which the masses could use guilt to hold back the pursuit of excellence. In light of this story, even if we do not commit the genetic fallacy and immediately conclude that this is how the concepts are now being deployed in the present, we might come to wonder what traces of this concept’s emergence in use have stayed with us in the present. We might wonder, in other words, whether those moral concepts are still having what (if Nietzsche is right) are bad effects on human life.

Or, to take another example, consider the concept of the *WELL-ROUNDED STUDENT* that is used in college admissions. According to recent work by Jerome Karabel, admissions officers at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton first started using this concept as a covert way of upholding certain anti-Semitic, classist, and racist admissions standards as a response to worries about the rising numbers of urban Jews on campus. In rough terms, Karabel argues that the admissions officers started using a concept of a student who was not only smart but played sports, was engaged in certain preferred extra-curricular activities, etc. to track a set of properties that they knew would be associated with the privileged elite of east-coast prep schools – and, which, for instance, urban Jews from public schools would lack. Imagine you just showed up in Harvard admissions office 10 years after the concept of *WELL-ROUNDED STUDENT* started being used. Even apart from anything about past use facts about this concept (including facts about why the concept *WELL-ROUNDED STUDENT* was introduced in the first place), seeing emergence facts about this concept (such as facts about how it was used once it was introduced) might bring to light things you weren’t seeing: e.g. how it was still being used as ideological prop for a quota system.

---

33 See (Karabel 2005).

34 Indeed, in some cases it might not even matter whether the story we are told about the emergence facts is even true. Consider, for instance, if one read Nietzsche’s story from the *On the Genealogy of Morals* (sketched in very broad brush-strokes above) as a fable as opposed to an actual historical account. Would one still find Nietzsche’s story unsettling even if we know the history is wrong and that the story is actually a fable? Perhaps so. In such a case, one might think of what is going on as a sort of thought experiment about the following question: if I was trying to accomplish bad aim X,
Let’s now turn to past use facts. Such facts can matter for the simple reason that, based on induction on the practical effects of the past use of a concept, one can learn things about what practical effects are likely (even if not guaranteed) in the present or future. Consider, for instance, criticisms of liberal democracy by those working broadly in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition such as Theodor Adorno or the early Jurgen Habermas.\(^{35}\) One thing that such Hegelian-Marxist criticisms often involve is the observation that, in actual practice, liberal democracies have not produced the sort of freedom that they themselves promise or that we should want. By itself, this sort of historical point can’t establish the conclusion that liberal democracy could never produce that freedom. However, insofar as past use can be a guide to what to expect in the present – including, for instance, unexpected connections between how certain concepts in liberal democracy have served as ideological support for certain forms of domination – this sort of historical observation can legitimately be used as the basis for conclusions for how we think liberal democracy might likely operate in the present and future.

Or, to take another example, consider Horkheimer and Adorno’s argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that there is a strong historical tendency for the deployment of instrumental reason to refuse to stay in a circumscribed place and seep over into our treatment of other people as objects for manipulation, including, crucially, in the rise of totalitarianism.\(^{36}\) Insofar as the deployment of instrumental reason involves tokening certain distinctive concepts (in certain ways) this can be seen as a worry about the practical effects of the deployment of certain concepts – worries that should be taken quite seriously if the historical account turned out to be correct.

In short, what this all means is this: in addition to conceptual history helping us better assess how epistemically fruitful it will be to use certain concepts rather than others, conceptual history can also play a role in our assessment of what practical issues there might be in deploying certain concepts. Insofar as facts about the practical effects (either actual or expected) of using certain concepts matters for settling the normative facts in conceptual

---

\(^{35}\) See (Adorno 1974) and (Habermas 1975).

\(^{36}\) (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002).
ethics then, holding fixed the starting idea of this paper that conceptual ethics matters to normative inquiry (or inquiry of any sort), then this shows us another way in which conceptual history matters for normative inquiry.

4. Conclusion.

In this paper, I have sought to establish the following basic idea: conceptual history can matter to normative inquiry. I have sometimes put this claim as follows: conceptual history can be *normatively relevant*. The basic picture that I have sketched here in this paper might be glossed as follows. Facts of conceptual history itself are non-normative facts, and, as such, they can’t by themselves determine the answers to our normative questions in normative inquiry. Nonetheless, they are descriptive facts that are relevant to normative inquiry. I made this case in the following basic way. First, I argued that some concepts are more apt for use in normative inquiry than others, and we should use those available ones that are most apt. Second, I argued that knowing about the history of concepts can help us assess how apt (or not apt) for normative inquiry some concepts are likely to be now, or in the future. Put together, these two thoughts form the core of my case for why conceptual history is normatively relevant.

Most philosophers don’t have explicit developed views on the normative relevance or irrelevance of conceptual history. Rather, mostly what happens is that philosophers simply hold non-articulated views on this topic and then simply using them in practice. If my arguments in this paper are on the right track, then here is the basic view that we should reject: conceptual history never matters to normative inquiry. That is, philosophers shouldn’t dismiss facts about the origins of and past use of concepts as irrelevant for figuring out the normative facts.

Buy what about someone engaged in addressing a *specific* normative question? How much does conceptual history matter then? There are no easy answers here: it depends, among other things, on what the other sources of evidence on the table are and the facts of conceptual history actually are. It is likely that sometimes conceptual history won’t be that important at all, but that in other cases it might be quite important indeed. Crucially, if the framework that I have been operating with in this paper is on the right track, then there isn’t a way of telling *in advance* whether or not parts of conceptual history are going to be of enough import that they need to be looked at by those engaged in a given instance of
normative inquiry. But what I think we can say is this: if conceptual history can be relevant to normative inquiry in the ways that I have sketched in this paper, then the question of how relevant conceptual history is for different parts of normative inquiry is something that we should ask. And, at the very least, it means that we shouldn’t simply proceed as if we already know the answer that it’s not that relevant. If this is right, it requires many of those working in normative inquiry to significantly readjust their working attitude toward conceptual history. In short, it means taking conceptual history seriously.

WORKS CITED


———. Manuscript-b. Conceptual Ethics II.


