

‘Genealogical anxiety’ and why questioning the genesis of your core beliefs ‘can liberate you’

I recently encountered a term for a syndrome that has bugged me since childhood: genealogical anxiety. The phrase was coined by up-and-coming Oxford philosopher [Amia Srinivasan](#) in an unpublished paper, “On Genealogy.”

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By genealogical anxiety, Srinivasan means the doubt that afflicts you—or should afflict you—when you contemplate the genesis of your beliefs, especially moral and political beliefs. Why are you a Muslim progressive, Buddhist libertarian, atheist anarchist, Christian white supremacist?

We like to think our beliefs are true, arrived at through hard-headed, unbiased observation and rational reflection. But if you’re honest with yourself, you realize that you absorbed your beliefs, at least in part, from the influences to which you happen to have been exposed, including your parents, teachers, friends and cultural milieu.

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So what should we do with these feelings of genealogical anxiety? Srinivasan and I have reached the same answer. Yes, recognizing the arbitrariness of your existence, and of your ideas about it, can be unsettling. It can trigger existential vertigo. But the flip side of this vertigo can be an exhilarating feeling of freedom. Genealogical anxiety can liberate you, it can give you a sense of vast possibility.

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