

Reply to Williams

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I hope it is clear from my paper (2013) the respect in which I hold Williams' ("Confucius, Mencius and the notion of true succession", 1988) original paper. He was a pioneer, in my view, in addressing the questions I address. It was his paper that first got me to think about these issues in a philosophical way. If there were anything I could see that he didn't see, it would only be because I am standing on his shoulders.

That having been said, I am happy to report that there is still much about which we disagree. One dispute, that does not I think run very deep, is that whether causal linkage, say by way of influencing, is a necessary condition for true succession. He thinks it is; I deny it. I think that we need *some* word for the relation between an earlier and a later thinker or group when there is similarity of ideas but no causal connection. I think that we sometimes use the idea of true succession to mark that relation, because it is perfectly correct to say that, for example, the true successors of the Luddites are certain groups of anti-global capitalist activists, even if the latter have never heard of the former. But if one wants to insist that this is not the way in which true succession is or should be understood, then let us by all means invent a new word for similarity-without-influence and reserve the phrase 'true successor' for similarity-plus-influence. I can't see that a lot hangs on this.

A dispute that runs more deeply is over the idea of development or advancement. Williams says that his original requirement, that (4) 'A would, *ceteris paribus*, have developed more or less the same central ideas as those actually developed by B' was intended to get at the idea that B's ideas were an 'advancement' over A's. He says: '... it now seems to me that (4) is not an expression of the claim that B's central ideas are an advancement over those of A, and since it is that claim I wished to express, I should have just made it a condition of true succession with no mention of (4)' (2013, 42). 'I also think that a true successor must 'go beyond' the predecessor's central ideas in developing original ones central to the successor...' (2013, 44).

Williams then gives his own new account of true succession and adds an account of tradition, the latter of which was not his focus in his original paper: (in brief) true succession is similarity plus advancement because influenced by; sameness of tradition is similarity because influenced by, but without advancement (2013, 44).

I think there are a few things wrong here. First, I assume the 'because' is the 'because' of causation or explanation. In the case of his account of true successor, it isn't clear whether Williams intends the scope of the explanandum that influence is meant to explain to be (a) similarity or (b) similarity and advancement or (c) just advancement. Influence isn't a good explanation of any of (a)-(c). Influence can cause someone to hold dissimilar ideas: Hegel's idealism was a major influence on Marx's rejection of idealism and adoption of historical materialism. Moreover, certainly some earlier thinker can influence a later thinker to adopt less advanced ideas.

But it is the unexplored idea of advancement, or of 'going beyond' as Williams sometimes metaphorically puts it, that is the most problematic aspect of William's new account. (I note that from time to time it seems to me that Williams conflates influence and advancement.) First, pace Williams, it is clear that a later thinker can be a true successor to a former even if he does not advance the former's ideas at all. I think Williams probably has in mind the case in which the later thinker simply repeats the ideas of the former, for

he held in his original article and repeats here (2013, 40-41) that if the central ideas of A and B were identical we would say that at worst one was guilty of plagiarism and that at best, by a rare coincidence, independent minds arrived at the same view.' But even in the case of the so-called plagiarist, I am not sure that we do not want to rule out as a bona fide example of true succession the sycophant who repeats the master's views in their entirety, albeit with some paraphrase or changed formulation or expression.

But the more interesting case is the true successor who produces a retrograde or degenerate version of an earlier body of ideas. It might be that some of the neo-Aristotelians of late antiquity produced a version of Aristotelianism that was less of an advancement and more of a retreat from the classical position of Aristotle. It might have been problematically concessive or eclectic. Williams says that 'true succession' is a term of praise (2013, 43); 'the successor owes something valuable to her predecessor' (2013, 42).

Of course, this raises the question: if true succession is a normative idea, as Williams says it is, how are we meant to evaluate whether something is or is not a theoretical advance? Did Engels advance or distort the ideas of Marx? Did Lenin? Did Cassirer advance or distort the ideas of Kant? But whatever the answers to the question of advancement versus distortion, these thinkers constitute lines of true succession, simply in light of the fact of the core similarity of their ideas, and they constitute a continuous tradition in light of the extent to which they influence others in the same line of descent over time.

Finally, I want to finish on a minor point. True succession is not just a one-many relation; it is a many-many relation, although both Williams and I rightly concentrate on the cases of one ancestor-many true successors. But one successor can also have many true ancestors; Marx was partly the true successor of Hegel, partly of Aristotle, and partly of the French materialists.

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References

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