

True Successors and Counterfactual Approval
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David-Hillel Ruben and John Williams have treated us to a fascinating discussion about the nature of true-succession, faithful-succession, intellectual traditions, and traditions of practice. In these comments, I want to focus on two related aspects of their ongoing discussion, in the hope of forging either (a) a new approach to identity-conditions of a tradition over time, or, at least, (b) a new disambiguation of the term ‘tradition’.

Direction

One issue that has divided the two thinkers can be called the ‘direction debate’. Williams (1988, 161) had once argued that one of the criteria for being a true-successor of a past individual (or, we can widen it to being a true-successor of a past group or community) would have to be forward-looking, from the perspective of the predecessor. The criterion in question (which I paraphrase in my own words) was this:

FORWARD-LOOKING CRITERION: An individual (or group) B is a true successor of an individual (or group) A iff A would, all things being equal, have developed more or less the same central ideas (or practices) as those actually developed by B.

Since the ideas of a tradition change over time (indeed, Williams argued that they have to, otherwise the true-succession relation stands to collapse into the mindless-plagiarism relation), one has to hope, if one wants to be faithful to one’s tradition, that one’s predecessors would have steered the tradition in, roughly, the same direction that you have. Otherwise, your deviations from the ideas and practices of your predecessors threaten to undermine your claim to having been a faithful successor.

Ruben (2013a, 37-38) criticizes the forward-looking criterion. His criticism, basically, runs as follows: for the forward-looking criterion to be fulfilled, the following counterfactual has to be true:

FULFILLMENT COUNTERFACTUAL: If A had lived long enough to overlap with the life of B, his central ideas (and practices) would have developed to correspond with those of B.

For the fulfillment counterfactual to be true, it would have to be the case that in the closest possible world to our own in which A lives long enough to overlap with the life of B, A goes on to develop more or less the same central beliefs (and practices) that B actually developed. Ruben thinks that the fulfillment counterfactual will never receive a determinate truth-value, and therefore the forward-looking criterion can never be

fulfilled. Rubin's objection is based on the claim that whether or not A, in the world/s in question, developed the target set of beliefs (and practices), depends upon which of A's other ideas and practices we hold fixed. And since, as Williams (2013a, 42) paraphrases Rubin, 'there are many different and incompatible ways in which we may fix these', we end up with the result that the fulfillment counterfactual will remain indeterminately true or false.

Williams (Ibid) remains unconvinced by Rubin's objection. He hopes that what we have to fix is pretty determinate: we have to fix all of the beliefs (and practices) of A at time *t*, if time *t* is the time in which A dies in the actual world. This seems to me to be a pretty solid response, and yet Williams then retreats. Williams (Ibid) accepts that writing a forward-looking criterion into our account of true-succession, with its attendant counterfactual, unnecessarily muddies the waters. Counterfactuals are notoriously difficult to verify, even if it's very clear what to hold fixed in isolating the closest possible world. As he puts it (Ibid): 'there seems to be no clear way in which we can decide whether in this imaginary world, A has developed more or less the same central ideas as those that B has developed.'

Consequently, Williams goes on to accept Rubin's backward-looking account, in which B is a true-successor of A iff B is chronologically later than A *and* B's central ideas (and practices) are qualitatively similar to those of A. If you remove the counterfactual claim, as Rubin's backward-looking account does, then you remove the murkiness of unverifiability. To capture fully what Williams had intended with his forward-looking criterion, he now wishes he had merely had a criterion stipulating that B's central ideas (and practices) need to constitute an advancement upon A's.

This notion, as to whether our conception of true-succession must include an advancement-criterion takes us on to the second issue in the discussion between Williams and Rubin that I want to focus upon.

Normativity

One way of characterising the ongoing discussion between Williams and Rubin is in terms of the progressive disambiguation of the concept of being a true-successor. In Rubin's latest contribution to the discussion, he states his conviction that we need two concepts (2013b, 21):

- (a) One on which a later group or individual merely holds similar and consistent beliefs with an earlier one, and;
- (b) Another on which the latter group is additionally influenced by the earlier.

Conception (a) helps Rubin to hold on to his intuition that two causally distinct groups, separated in time, can stand in some relation of successorhood; just as certain groups of anti-global capitalist activists might be considered to be the successors of the Luddites, without knowing who they are or what they stood for. Conception (b) helps Williams to hold on to his intuition that there is certainly an important sense of ‘successorhood’ that cannot stand between such causally discontinuous groups. I cannot be Karl Marx’s intellectual heir, at least in some senses of the phrase, ‘intellectual heir’, if I’ve never heard of him. And thus, as Rubin points out, we probably just have two concepts in play: conception (a) and conception (b).

In fact, the Williams-Rubin discussion has given rise to further disambiguation. Williams has been championing a normative conception of successorhood that seems quite alien to Rubin. If I have understood him correctly, this normative conception subdivides into the following two, distinct, concepts:

(c) One on which judging a later group or individual to be a true successor of an early one ‘involves a commitment to judging her praiseworthy provided the predecessor’s central ideas are praiseworthy (Williams 2013b, 13).

(d) Another on which a later group can only serve as a true successor to an early one if their ideas (or practices) constitute an advancement upon those of their predecessors (Ibid, 15).

Conception (c) is probably agreeable even to Rubin, but Rubin certainly wants to allow for a notion of successorhood that is distinct from (d), with its advancement-criterion. Rubin thus wants to make room for the case of the true successor who produces retrograde or degenerate versions of an earlier body of ideas, as, perhaps, some of the neo-Aristotelians did to the body of ideas put forward by Aristotle. I don’t think this has to be a particularly intractable debate between Rubin and Williams: they’re simply functioning with different conceptions of successorhood; Williams is functioning with conception (d), and Rubin isn’t; that doesn’t mean that conception (d) isn’t a valid disambiguation of the term ‘true-successor’ which is *sometimes* said with an attendant tone of praise, and sometimes said with no attendant evaluative tone of voice.

A New Diagnosis

In what remains of these reflections, and drawing the previous two sections together, I want to suggest that there is at least one important normative sense of ‘successorhood’ that needs to remain forward-looking. And, I hope to demonstrate that this forward-looking notion of successorhood provides yet another diagnosis for the intractability of debates between competing successors for the title-deeds to a tradition.

William's original forward-looking criterion, it seems to me, captured, or came close to capturing, something distinctive about the phenomenology of holding oneself to be a true-successor to a tradition. Some Christians have a doctrine that their church is *the one true church*, let's call it church p. Any such Christian would feel confident that if Jesus were to come back to earth, church p would somehow receive Jesus' approval above all other churches. Put crudely (and somewhat glibly): church p would be the one that Jesus would go to every Sunday. Now, this isn't identical to the forward-looking criterion put forward by Williams. Jesus, in my example, might disagree with some of the central ideas of church p; he might have been surprised by some of the twists and turns that occurred along the timeline of the church's evolution, but, all things being equal, looking at all of the churches around, he might say, 'church p is the one that has my approval'. For instance, Jesus might think that the apostolic office of Peter has been passed down, from person to person, such that the leader of church p is the rightful inheritor, and that church p should be his church despite any disagreements over doctrine.

When I talk about the phenomenology of holding oneself to be a true-successor, I mean that this Christian might feel a profound sense of closeness to Jesus, not merely in having similar beliefs, or practices, but in the knowledge that Jesus would somehow approve of her belonging to that Church.

In his noteworthy debate with Arnold Toynbee, Yaakov Herzog, arguing that ancient Jewish civilisation was very much alive and embodied in the Jewish world of today, made the following claim:

Of all the ancient peoples of the Middle East, we are the only one living in continuity today in the Middle East, speaking the same language, practicing the same religious faith ... Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai ... and Rabbi Akiva and Bar Kokhba — if they were to come to life and could live with us — would not find a dichotomy that snapped them assunder. There is a continuity of experience (Herzog 1975, 43).

As far as I'm aware, this is the only published kernel of a story that is often told in Yaakov Herzog's name. The story goes something like this: Socrates, or Aristotle, gets off a plane in Athens airport. He can't understand the local language, and has to get an interpreter who speaks both ancient and modern Greek. He asks to see the Acropolis. It's in ruins. He asks to see the temple of Zeus. There is no temple of Zeus. There is a Greek Orthodox Church. Greece is, mainly, a Christian country today. Meanwhile, in Tel Aviv, an old man is getting off a plane. He is greeted by a member of the airport staff in Hebrew. The old man responds in Hebrew. "I am Moshse (Moses)," the old man says.

“I am also Moshe,” says the worker. Have you ever been to Israel before?”

“Unfortunately not.” The story goes on; Moses goes to pray in the local synagogue, where a copy of his Torah sits in the ark, etc. etc. They put on phylacteries ...

The story goes too far. Is Modern Hebrew so much closer to ancient Hebrew that Moses would have no trouble communicating? I doubt it. He certainly wouldn't be able to read the modern alphabet. What type of phylacteries would Moses wear? The type argued for by Rashi in the eleventh century, or the type argued for by Rashi's grandson? Indeed, the Talmud itself recognizes that if Moses were to be transported into the Jewish future, he'd feel a little bit out of place (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot 29b):

When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing ornamental crowns to the letters. Moses said, ‘Lord of the Universe, who delays your hand?’ He answered, ‘There will arise a man, at the end of many generations, Akiva son of Joseph by name, who will expound upon each tittle heaps and heaps of laws’. ‘Lord of the Universe’, said Moses; ‘show him to me’. He replied, ‘Turn around’. Moses went and sat down behind eight rows [and listened to Rabbi Akiva teaching, and his students discussing]. Not being able to follow their arguments, he felt weakened, but when they came to a certain topic and the disciples said to the teacher ‘From where do you know it?’ and he [Akiva] replied to them ‘It is a law given unto Moses at Sinai’, he [Moses] was comforted.

But what Herzog gets right is the sense that if Moses were brought back from the dead, after the initial shock of seeing how much things have changed, he would, at least so the Orthodox Jew would argue (the Muslim, Christian, and non-Orthodox Jew would certainly argue otherwise), give today's Orthodox Jewry his approval; he'd say, ‘however much things have changed, and I might not agree with all of their central ideas and practices, or even understand them all, these are *my* people.’¹

And, it's this sort of counterfactual approval that many successors are looking for, and believe themselves to have, from their forebears. To think that Moses would approve is to feel a certain sort of closeness to him. Let me state my case clearly:

i. Not every disambiguation of ‘true-successor’ will have a counterfactual approval criterion, but:

¹ Of course, the Orthodox Jew will have to concede, and probably do so willingly, that Moses will recognize a sense of fraternity with all affiliated Jews; but that the Orthodox grouping will win his approval above others – thanks to Carl Mosser for pointing out the need for this footnote!

- ii. There is a notion of a true-successor that *does* have such a criterion;
- iii. According to that notion, B is a true-successor of A iff A would approve² of B's central ideas (and practices), after some initial shock, if A were to be resurrected from the dead, or suddenly and abruptly transported into the future to see B for himself.

This forward-looking notion will not leave things indeterminate. We know just how to isolate the closest possible world in question. We're talking about the closest possible world in which A, going with the resurrection route, for the moment, died just at the time that he died in the actual world, with the exact same set of beliefs and practices at the time of his death as he had when he died in the actual world, but in which he is later resurrected to witness the ideas and practices of B. There will be a fact of the matter, I argue, or at least, there will often be a fact of the matter, as to which of the potential successors would receive such approval from A over all of the contenders. But, that fact will be epistemically inaccessible to us, because counterfactuals are, as we have discussed above, notoriously difficult to verify.

Rubin (2013a, 45) claims that debates between competing claims to being the unique true-successor to some earlier tradition are intractable because the facts of the matter are inherently vague. Social institutions, such as traditions and schools of thought, are too hazily individuated for it to be any other way. On my account of at least one form of successorhood there will be a fact of the matter. Herzog was either wrong or right in the claim that he was making about Jewish civilisation. But, the fact of the matter is epistemically inaccessible to us; hence the intractability of these debates.

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² Depending on the tradition, approval will come in different shapes and sizes, sometimes it will depend upon similarity of doctrine, sometimes on similarity of praxis, sometimes upon chains of succession, sometimes, perhaps, on an ineffable sense of solidarity!

Williams, John (2013b). "Further reflections on true successors and traditions." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (9): 12-16.