

Reply to Williams' Reply

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I wish to thank John Williams again for his careful and insightful response to my earlier reply. I discern three issues from his response that I would like to address.

Issue 1

The analysis of the concept of true succession. On this, I think that Williams is partly right and partly wrong. I think we need two concepts:

- (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.

I am not overly concerned about the names we give those two concepts. I called (a) true succession. But I think that Williams is right in contending that my use of faithful succession as a synonym for true succession might be misleading.

Issue 2

Why, according to Williams, might the synonymous usage of “faithful” and “true” be misleading? He says that faithful succession is clearly an evaluative idea, and since faithfulness requires influence, either true succession does as well or they are not synonymous. “It seems that Ruben must either accept that influence is a necessary condition for true succession or abandon his previous position that true successors are faithful successors” (12-13).

But in exactly what sense is either true succession or faithfulness evaluative? Williams links evaluation to praise but he does not recognise degrees or grades of evaluation. For example, a person’s belief can be justified even when false. Or a body of evidence sufficiently skewed can inductively support a ludicrous conclusion. To say that such a belief is justified or such a conclusion is supported by evidence is a weak form of epistemic evaluation. It doesn’t seem terribly connected with the idea of praise, as we normally understand that term.

I think that in the case of true succession, the sense of evaluation can only be the same weak one as when we might say of a rough sketch that it is more or less of a faithful copy or a true reproduction of a more precise map or picture.

Thinking of evaluation in this way is consistent with what I said about true succession. I think it is also true of faithful succession—one sketch can be a more faithful copy of a picture than another. But I don’t place a lot of weight on this because, to repeat, I do think we need two concepts, (a) and (b) above. If someone thinks that faithful succession has a stronger evaluative component than the one I attribute to true succession, and therefore wants to dub (a) true succession and (b) faithful succession, I am happy to embrace that horn of the dilemma he offers me and to distinguish the two ideas.

Williams himself embraces this sort of strategy in distinguishing now between a true successor and a true follower, in order to reply my criticism about the follower who fails to advance the ideas or thought system of his or her master.

Issue 3

I think of (a) influence as being a distinct necessary condition for true succession, along with (b) temporal succession, (c) consistency, (d) similarity and (e) (let me add it for the sake of argument) intellectual advancement. I take the various requirements to be independent conditions in the analysis of sameness of tradition (or of Williams' true succession).

Williams holds that there is an explanatory requirement within the analysis: true succession requires (b) and that (a) explains (c), (d), and (e). Williams does make it clear that influence is only to be part of the full explanation, thereby hoping to account for the case of influence but failure of similarity or consistency or advancement.

My analysis is the weaker of the two; his, the stronger. I obviously do accept that often influence is part of the explanation for consistency, similarity, and advancement (if and when there is advancement). But I can envision a case in which there is influence of the earlier on the later and consistency of the latter (for instance) but in which the influence of the earlier is not the cause or explanation for the consistency of the latter. A latter thinker's ideas are highly influenced by and indeed very similar to an earlier thinker's ideas, but the poor chap has unsuspectingly introduced an inconsistency into his system. One of the latter's contemporaries points out the inconsistency and is therefore the one responsible for its elimination and the restoration of the consistency.

I see no advantage in building this explanatory requirement into the analysis. Williams would have to show me what is to be gained by so doing.

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References

Williams, John. 2013. "Further Reflection on True Successors and Traditions." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (9): 12-16.