

***Ruben's Account of Traditions and True Successors: Two Modifications and an Extension***

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In his "[Traditions and True Successors](#)," David-Hillel Ruben offers the following analysis of what it is for Y to be the true successor of X:

**Successor:** Y is a true successor of X if and only if (i) Y is a temporal successor of X and (ii) the beliefs and practices of Y are qualitatively similar, to a very high degree, to those of X. (2013, 43)

This analysis gets built into an analysis of what it is for Y to inherit a tradition which X either originates or belongs to:

**Inheritance:** Y is an inheritor of X's tradition iff (i) Y is a true successor of X, and (iii) Y develops  $S_Y$  because X develops  $S_X$ , where 'because' signals causal influence. (ibid. 41)

In this discussion I urge two modifications to Ruben's view: one to **Successor**, and one to **Inheritance**. With the modified view in place, I then suggest how it could be extended to encompass the account offered by Samuel Lebens in his "[True Successors and Counterfactual Approval](#)."

**The Modification to 'Successor': Temporal Successorhood**

Ruben seems to leave the notion of Y's being a temporal successor of X unanalyzed. What does it take, exactly, for Y to be temporal successor of X? Must Y have come into existence at a later time than X does? Or must there be no overlap between X and Y at all, so that Y comes into existence after X goes out of existence? Or is there some other condition that must be met? The first condition seems likely to have been met in most historical cases: the successor of X is usually younger than X. But I don't think this condition ought to be built into the definition of true-successorhood. X might have had a twin brother, born at the same time, who became the inheritor of X's ideas and practices after X died. If X's twin can be his true successor, then the first condition must be rejected. The second condition also looks false, because X's true successor could easily have *known* X, and developed his ideas and practices as a direct response to conversation and instruction from X. We might want to count G. E. M. Anscombe as the later Wittgenstein's true successor, for instance.

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I propose that temporal overlap between X and Y is not a relevant concern, here, and that we give an analysis of temporal successorhood along the lines given by John Williams (2013, 42) What we're concerned with, in **Successor**, is primarily a similarity relation between two sets of beliefs and practices, call them  $S_X$  and  $S_Y$ . This suggests that the relevant notion of temporal successorhood ought to apply to Y, not in virtue of when Y comes into existence, but in virtue of when  $S_Y$  does. What's important isn't that Y be born after X is born, or after X dies, but that Y develops  $S_Y$  after X develops  $S_X$ . We thus have:

**Successor\*:** Y is a true successor of X iff there is an  $S_X$  and an  $S_Y$  such that (i) Y develops  $S_Y$  after X develops  $S_X$  and (ii)  $S_Y$  is qualitatively similar, to a very high degree, to  $S_X$ .

**Successor\*** might already be implicit in what Ruben says in his essay (Williams certainly seems to think it is); if not, then I hope to have given some reason why it *ought* to be Ruben's considered view.

### The Modification to 'Inheritance': Making Identity Transitive

Ruben hopes to use his analysis of inheritance – and hence of true-successorhood – to give an account of the identity-conditions of traditions over time. (2013, 40) How does the analysis go? The idea seems to be this. Suppose that Y inherits X's tradition, in virtue of the similarity and causal relations between  $S_Y$  and  $S_X$ . Suppose further that Z inherits Y's tradition, in virtue of the similarity and causal relations between  $S_Z$  and  $S_Y$ . In a case like this, it seems, Ruben wants to say that Z inherits X's tradition: given the similarity relation connecting  $S_X$ ,  $S_Y$  and  $S_Z$ , and given that there is causal dependence of each belief/practice set in the chain on the prior set, X, Y and Z constitute a single tradition.<sup>1</sup> This suggests the following identity-condition for a tradition over time:

**Identity:** A tradition T exists at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  iff (i) there is an X who originates or inherits T in virtue of an  $S_X$ , (ii) X has  $S_X$  at  $t_1$ , (iii) there is a Y who originates or inherits T in virtue of an  $S_Y$ , and (iv) Y has  $S_Y$  at  $t_2$ .

The problem here is that, as Ruben acknowledges, true-successorhood (as defined in **Successor** and **Successor\***) is non-transitive, because qualitative similarity is non-transitive. (ibid. 39) Since true-successorhood is part of inheritance, it follows that inheritance is non-transitive: Y can belong to the same tradition as X, and Z can belong to the same tradition as Y, and yet Z can fail to belong to the same tradition as X.<sup>2</sup> Identity,

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<sup>1</sup> That this is Ruben's view is suggested by what he says on page 41 of his 2013: he insists that qualitative similarity between  $S_X$  and  $S_Y$  is not enough to make X and Y members of the same tradition, at which point he introduces the causal constraint on inheritance. This suggests that inheritance, rather than true-successorhood, *does* suffice for X and Y being members of the same tradition.

<sup>2</sup> The problem will be even worse if causation is non-transitive, because then it will not follow, from the fact that Y adopts  $S_Y$  because of  $S_X$  and Z adopts  $S_Z$  because of  $S_Y$ , that Z adopts  $S_Z$  because of  $S_X$ ; the

however, is a transitive relation. If a tradition exists over time by having inheritors at different times, then the inheritance relation needs to be transitive.

We might try for a solution by modifying **Successor** again. Qualitative similarity isn't transitive, but there's a relation in the vicinity that is. We might propose:

**Successor\*\***: Y is a true successor of X if there is an  $S_X$  and an  $S_Y$  such that (i)  $S_X$  and  $S_Y$  stand on opposite ends of a chain of Ss (which may include only  $S_X$  and  $S_Y$ ), (ii) each link  $S_n$  is developed after  $S_{n-1}$  and (iii) each link  $S_n$  is qualitatively similar, to a very high degree, to  $S_{n-1}$ .

When the chain of Ss includes only  $S_X$  and  $S_Y$ , **Successor\*\*** is a notational variant on **Successor\***. However, if the chain includes three or more belief/practice sets, then the advantage of **Successor\*\*** becomes clear, because the relation captured by clauses (i)-(iii) is transitive: if  $S_Y$  stands at the end of a similarity chain connecting to  $S_X$ , and  $S_Z$  stands at the end of a similarity chain connecting to  $S_Y$ , then  $S_Z$  stands at the end of a similarity chain connecting to  $S_X$ .

If **Successor\*\*** is built into **Inheritance**, as cashing out the relation of true-successorhood, then inheritance becomes a transitive relation, and we have a workable account of the identity of a tradition over time. This account has the further advantage that it allows the inheritors of a tradition to differ quite radically with respect to the relevant beliefs and practices from those who initiated the tradition.<sup>3</sup> One might try to define membership in the analytic tradition in terms of qualitative similarity to the beliefs and practices of its originators,<sup>4</sup> but I doubt that contemporary work is similar enough to the [\*Principia Ethica\*](#) or [\*Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus\*](#) to allow contemporary analytic philosophers to satisfy **Successor\*\***. Since Ruben seems unconcerned to build counterfactual approval of Y by X into his analysis of tradition, he should favour a view of inheritance which gets around this problem (especially if, as I argue later, counterfactual approval is grounded in qualitative similarity).

I think, however, that we shouldn't adopt **Successor\*\***. There is a tradition in philosophy that starts with Russell, Wittgenstein and others, and which runs right up to contemporary analytic philosophy. Now, suppose, as is the case, that there arises on the contemporary

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causal chain required to connect X and Z in the same tradition will be broken. For my purposes, I'll assume that causation is transitive, but philosophers who think otherwise and who have an interest in the identity-conditions of traditions should try to find an alternative to Ruben's analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Lebens (2013) offers an account of traditions, based on an account of true-successorhood, which *won't* allow for this; he would thus insist that while **Successor\*\*** will work in an analysis of the concept that Ruben is interested in, we must make room for a different concept which won't allow for this. I discuss Lebens's view in more detail below.

<sup>4</sup> A.P. Martinich provides a backwards-looking counterfactual criterion (contrast with the forward-looking counterfactual accounts discussed by Ruben, Williams, and Lebens): "would have done philosophy the way Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein did it if they had been doing philosophy when Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein were." (Martinich 2001, 5)

scene a group of philosophers who seem to be far more similar in their philosophical beliefs and practices to the early Wittgenstein than any of their contemporaries (here I'm thinking of the ['New Wittgensteinians'](#)). Whom should we count as Wittgenstein's true successors? My money is on the New Wittgensteinians; other contemporary philosophers are certainly members of the analytic tradition, but they have little claim to the title of true successors. But if we adopt **Successor\*\***, then we can't say this: **Successor\*\*** tells us that if there is a similarity chain running from  $S_X$  to  $S_Y$ , then Y's claim to be a true successor of X depends on the similarity between Y's beliefs and practices and those of Y's immediate predecessor. Surely, one would think, Cora Diamond's claim to be a true successor of the early Wittgenstein (whether valid or not) depends on her similarity to *him*, not her similarity to her immediate predecessors.

I suggest, then, that we leave true-successorhood out of the definition of inheritance, and instead of using the notion of a similarity chain to define true-successorhood, we use the notion of a causal-similarity chain to define inheritance directly:

**Inheritance\*:** Y is an inheritor of a tradition T iff (i) there is some X that originates T, (ii)  $S_X$  and  $S_Y$  stand on opposite ends of a chain of Ss (which may include only  $S_X$  and  $S_Y$ ), (iii) each link  $S_n$  is developed after  $S_{n-1}$ , (iv) each link  $S_n$  is qualitatively similar, to a very high degree, to  $S_{n-1}$ , and (v) the holder of  $S_n$  develops  $S_n$  *because* the holder of  $S_{n-1}$  develops  $S_{n-1}$ .

By sticking with **Successor\*** and adopting **Inheritance\***, we get everything we want. We leave true-successorhood as a non-transitive relation, while still making inheritance (and hence identity) transitive. We also allow that traditions can undergo radical change, since Y can stand at the end of a long causal-similarity chain that starts with X, while having very different beliefs and practices from X. But we allow ourselves to say that the true successor of the early Wittgenstein must have similar philosophical beliefs and practices to *him*, and not necessarily to a recent link on a causal-similarity chain.

### **The Extension: Counterfactual Approval, or Qualitative Similarity?**

Samuel Lebens suggests that there is one notion of true-successorhood that will rely, not on the sorts of similarity-relations that Ruben is concerned with, but on the kind of counterfactual criterion that Williams originally proposed. On Lebens's view, that is, there is a concept of true-successorhood with the following shape:

**Successor-L:** Y is a true successor of X iff there is an  $S_X$  and  $S_Y$  such that (i) Y develops  $S_Y$  after X develops  $S_X$ , and (ii) X would approve of  $S_Y$ , after some initial shock, if X were to be resurrected from the dead, or suddenly and abruptly transported into the future to see Y for himself. (2013, 31)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In conversation, Lebens suggested he would accept my notion of temporal successorhood, as given in (i).

I suspect, contrary to Lebens, that **Successor-L** isn't as different from **Successor** (or **Successor\***) as he thinks it is.

Claims about what X would approve of can't hang in the air; we need some account of *why* X would or wouldn't approve of Y. It seems to me that X's judgments of approval would be based largely (if not solely) on judgments of qualitative similarity: X would approve/disapprove of  $S_Y$  because of its similarity/dissimilarity to  $S_X$ .

To see this, consider the story that Lebens passes on in his essay, about what would happen if Aristotle and Moses were transported to contemporary Athens and Tel Aviv, respectively. If Aristotle arrived in contemporary Athens, he would find that no one spoke his language, that the Acropolis lay in ruins, and that there is no more temple of Zeus. The religious and social practices of contemporary Athenians would be completely foreign to Aristotle. By contrast, Moses would feel much more at home in contemporary Tel Aviv: Hebrew is still spoken, the religious customs of the population are very similar to his own, etc. (2013, 29-30) Moses would approve of the lives of contemporary Israelis in a way that Aristotle would not approve of the lives of contemporary Athenians. (It should be noted that Lebens doesn't himself accept that Moses *would* be able to approve of the lives of contemporary Israelis; if the reader agrees, he/she may substitute a different example.)

It strikes me that these hypothetical judgments of our time-travelers would be largely grounded in judgments of qualitative similarity: we're supposed to imagine Moses saying that contemporary Israelis are *his* people (ibid. 30), because their lives are sufficiently similar to his, in a way that the lives of contemporary Greeks are not similar to Aristotle's. If that's right, however, then we need a reason to appeal to counterfactual approval at all, rather than ground true-successorhood in qualitative similarity directly.

There may be cases where an appeal to similarity and an appeal to counterfactual approval yield different results, and so cases where the appeal to counterfactual approval adds something. Suppose that X is not a reliable judge of qualitative similarity, seeing any slight divergence of  $S_Y$  from  $S_X$  as a radical one, radical enough to render  $S_Y$  dissimilar enough to merit disapproval. That supposition having been made, **Successor\*** and **Successor-L** give different verdicts in many cases: **Successor\*** will count Y as a true successor while **Successor-L** won't, because although  $S_Y$  is highly similar to  $S_X$ , X sees  $S_Y$  as being radically different from  $S_X$ . However, in a case like this **Successor-L** seems to lose its appeal; if X is such a bad judge of similarity, so that *any* divergence merits disapproval, why would anyone care about X's counterfactual approval? **Successor-L** is plausible only on the assumption that X would be a reliable judge of qualitative similarity. We might then modify **Successor-L** to read:

**Successor-L\*:** Y is a true successor of X iff there is an  $S_X$  and an  $S_Y$  such that (i) Y develops  $S_Y$  after X develops  $S_X$  and (ii) X would correctly judge that  $S_Y$  is qualitatively similar, to a very high degree, to  $S_X$ .

This definition, however, looks to be equivalent to **Successor\***.

I've tried to show that Ruben's analysis of true-successorhood can encompass Lebens's, but if **Successor\*** and **Inheritance\*** are accepted, then it looks like Ruben's analysis of the identity conditions of traditions over time won't be able to encompass Lebens's. Lebens treats the identity of a tradition as a function of true-successorhood: the members of a tradition are the true successors of its originators. By contrast, I've recommended that Ruben analyze the identity of a tradition over time in terms of inheritance, and insisted that true-successorhood not be built into the analysis of inheritance. How, then, can Ruben's account of true-successorhood encompass Lebens's, if the former doesn't provide identity conditions for traditions?

If we insist on having the concept of membership in a tradition like the one that Lebens insists on, then it seems to me that we can get it simply by insisting that there are *two* concepts of membership in a tradition, one of which is defined in terms of inheritance (as above) and one of which is defined in terms of true-successorhood, as follows:

**Identity\*:** A tradition T exists at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  iff (i) there is an X who originates T, or is a true successor of the originator of T, in virtue of an  $S_X$ , (ii) X has  $S_X$  at  $t_1$ , (iii) there is a Y who is a true successor of the originator of T in virtue of an  $S_Y$ , and (iv) Y has  $S_Y$  at  $t_2$ .

**Identity\*** can simply be added to Ruben's analysis, since it can be gotten from **Successor\***. Moreover, the resulting view is simpler than Lebens's. Suppose that Lebens accepts the original constraint that identity be defined indirectly, through the concept of inheritance. Then in order to get two identity concepts from two successorhood concepts, as he wants to, he will need two inheritance concepts. By contrast, if true-successorhood is taken out of the analysis of inheritance – as I've suggested it should, on Ruben's account – and we refuse to distinguish Lebens's and Ruben's successorhood concepts, then we can define **Identity** directly in terms of **Inheritance\*** and define **Identity\*** directly in terms of **Successor\***; we thus have four concepts instead of six. Now, Lebens gives no indication that he rejects the original constraint, but if he does, he will still need five concepts: two successor ones, an inheritance one, and an identity one. Ruben's analysis (with the modifications) thus captures the phenomena Lebens points to, but does it more simply than Lebens's analysis.

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