

Traditions and True Successors: A Few Pragmatic Considerations
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Building upon previous work by John Williams, David-Hillel Ruben has launched an exciting discussion about traditions and true successors that Williams and Ruben themselves, as well as Samuel Lebens and Jonathan Payton, have taken several steps further. In particular, I consider Payton's proposal for the concept of inheritance of a tradition through a causal-similarity chain convincing (Payton 2013a, 43 "Inheritance*"). While I also concur with Payton in regard to his proposed modifications of Ruben's initial concept of true succession (Payton 2013a, 41 "Successor*"), I suggest that some further modifications be made. These modifications include, on the one hand, that we incorporate a causal connection into the concept of true successorhood and, on the other hand, that we exclude the possibility that a true successor may develop a retrograde or degenerate version of the predecessor's cultural heritage. Moreover, I propose to make a small change in the wording, in order to make the concept slightly more flexible and perhaps accommodate to some extent a point made by Lebens. (This change in the wording should, analogically and for the same reasons, be made with regard to the concept of inheritance of a tradition.)

The reason for proposing these modifications have, in my view, all to do with the basic puzzle that has motivated Ruben's reflections in the first place: Why, and under what conditions, do potentially violent social disputes about true succession or (true) inheritance of a tradition emerge? I therefore recall the basic issue of interest that motivates (and justifies) the on-going discussion before I briefly explain the modification in the concept of true succession that I propose to make, and its implications for an answer to the basic question of the discussion.

The Puzzle

Ruben started the discussion on the basis of the observation, that often two or more parties each claim that they, but not its rival(s), are the true or faithful successors of some earlier person or group (or the rightful inheritor of a tradition). Such disputes, Ruben further observed, occasionally take the form of social conflicts, with the individual members of the rival parties being even willing to die for the cause. In the light of these observations, Ruben suggests that philosophical reflections about true succession and traditions have a twofold goal: Firstly, a conceptual structure that facilitates the analysis of disputes over true successorhood and inheritance of a tradition must be developed. And secondly, a convincing explanation must be provided, as to why such disputes are so intractable (Ruben 2013a, 32). The latter, of course, constitutes the justification of the whole enterprise, as an explanation is probably the best thing that (analytic) philosophers can provide to help understand and mitigate such conflicts.

The explanation that Ruben then gives is that vagueness, rather than ambiguity, lies at the core of disputes over true succession or inheritance of a tradition. Claims to true

successorhood (or membership of a tradition) are essentially contestable because true succession (and membership in a tradition), like similarity, is a non-transitive and many-one relation (see also Williams 2013, 43).

The Conceptual Structure

For the task of developing a conceptual structure that deals with such social disputes, I consider Payton's (2013a, 43 "Inheritance*") proposal to define the concept of inheritance of a tradition through a causal-similarity chain convincing, and therefore agree to adopt it:

True Inheritor of a Tradition:¹ *Y is a true inheritor of a tradition T iff (i) there is some X that originates T, (ii) S_X and S_Y stand on opposite chains of S_S (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} .*

For the conceptual structure to be complete, we need a concept of true successorhood. Again Payton's preferred version (Payton, 2013, 41 "Successor*") is very attractive. Nevertheless, I propose to adopt it in a modified version:

True Successor: *Y is a true successor of X iff there is a set of beliefs and/or practices S_X and a set of beliefs and/or practices S_Y such that, (i) Y develops S_Y after X develops S_X , (ii) S_Y is qualitatively similar, to a very high degree, to S_X , (iii) S_Y is either an updated or a consistently advanced, but not a retrograde version of S_X , and (iv) Y develops S_Y because X has developed S_X .*

Hence, I recommend to modify Payton's Successor* in three respects:

- 1) With (iii) I specify the possible forms that the qualitatively similar set of beliefs and/or practices of the successor may take in comparison to the set of beliefs and/or practices of the predecessor, if we are to speak of true successorhood.
- 2) With (iv) I incorporate a causal connection into the concept.
- 3) I supplement the grammatical conjunction "and" with an exclusive "or".

Combined, the two concepts imply that a true successor Y is not necessarily also a true inheritor of the tradition generated by X. If the tradition generated by X has been carried on by a number of others, S_Y is the true successor of to S_X , but lack the necessary

¹ "S" signifies a set of beliefs and(/or) practices.

qualitative similarity to S_{Y-1} . Analogically, a true inheritor of the tradition generated by X is not necessarily a true successor of X as the qualitative similarity required for the inheritor refers to S_{Y-1} , which may be S_X , but also some intermediate S_n if the chain includes links in between of S_X and S_Y .

Modification 1

(iii) S_Y is either an updated or a consistently advanced, but not a retrograde version of S_X ,

Williams (2013, 43) argues against Ruben that we should exclude the option of retrograde versions because true succession is, in his view, a term of praise. I think that we are well-advised to follow Williams's proposal and exclude retrograde versions from the concept, even if his argument were to be wrong: No person or group will ever raise a claim to true successorhood by asserting to have developed a retrograde (or degenerate) version of the earlier set of beliefs and/or practices. Consequently, no potentially violent social dispute will arise, and we need not multiply the range of potential candidates for true successorhood. The same obviously applies to the plagiarizer who hopes that his theft of ideas will go undetected.

Claimants to true successorhood will justify their claim to true successorhood either by declaring that they have consistently advanced the predecessor's set of beliefs and/or practices; or, for instance, if the assumption is made that the predecessor's teaching cannot be improved and hence, every substantial change in the predecessor's set of beliefs and/or practices will, from this claimant's perspective, constitute a distortion, a claimant may hold that true successors just need to make sure that the predecessor's teaching is in keeping with the times. That is, it may be argued that the true successor's task is to ensure that S_Y has the same meaning in the world in which Y lives (W_Y) as S_X had in W_X (cf. Ruben 2013a, 38). Pace Williams (2013, 44), then, a true successor's set of beliefs and/or practices need not constitute an advanced version of the predecessor, but merely a timely update. In fact, the propositional content of S_X and S_Y may even be identical. In this case, the claimant to true successorhood will (have to) argue that no relevant sociological changes have occurred since the time in which X developed S_X . (I.e. S_Y in W_Y corresponds to S_X in W_X because S_Y is identical with S_X and W_Y is, in the relevant respects, identical with W_X). An example may be given with Jehova's Witnesses, who claim that the Bible must be taken literally, but needs to be preached in translation because Jesus evangelized the people in their native tongue.

Modification 2

(iv) S_Y develops S_X because X has developed S_X .

Ruben's (and Payton's, but see Payton 2013b, 19) reason for not integrating a causal connection into the concept of true successorhood, as Williams (1988, 161; 2013, 44)

proposes, is that he wants to include the conceivable case in which a later group happens to develop the same set of beliefs and/or practices as an earlier group without having been influenced by that earlier group (Ruben 2013a, 38). As an empirical example, Ruben cites certain groups of anti-global capitalist activists that display, as he suggests, a set of beliefs and/or practices that is qualitatively similar to that of the Luddites without probably having ever heard of the latter (Ruben 2013b, 8; see also Ruben 2013a, 38). Ruben agrees with Williams in that not much hangs on such cases. Indeed, no social dispute with a second group (say Neo-Luddites) *can* arise if the anti-global capitalist activists are not even aware of the existence of their congenial predecessors. And hardly any scholar – certainly not a historian of political thought from Cambridge – will do all she can to supply the later group with the general recognition as true successor by arguing that S_Y in W_Y corresponds to S_X in W_X . Hence, if not much hangs on such cases, we need not take them into account in the present discussion.

Modification 3

a set of beliefs and/or practices

The third modification is only meant to affirm that a true successor is always a predecessor's true successor in *some respect*, i.e. in some selected beliefs, in some selected practices, or in some selected beliefs and practices. I also conjecture that rival claimants to true successorhood are usually aware and ready to admit that they consider many beliefs and practices that their predecessor has displayed to be irrelevant for the question of true successorhood. The New Wittgensteinians will not dispute the claim of (other groups of) analytic philosophers to be the true successors of Wittgenstein on the basis that they ignore the young Wittgenstein's private letters, that they are disinclined to play the clarinet or volunteer for the army. In addition to the varying emphases that rivals may lay on the common predecessor's individual beliefs and practices, their social dispute may thus also be caused by their consideration of different sets of beliefs and/or practices as relevant for the question of true successorhood.

While I believe that this small modification has been implicitly assumed in the discussion, the point is noteworthy because it provides an alternative line of justification of why Obama might legitimately claim to be Washington's true successor irrespective of a possible convergence of ideas. Lebens argued that Obama might wish to argue that Washington would – if resurrected from the dead – approve of him as true successor simply because of the historical chain of transmission of the office, while Payton replied that the conceptual structure for dealing with issues of true successorhood and inheritance of a tradition should not include political offices (Lebens 2013b, 67; Payton 2013b, 14). Yet, if we assume that Obama's claim to true successorhood is predicated upon the similarity in some selected practices such as that of running (successfully) for office of POTUS, we do not need to integrate the criterion of counter-factual approval in our concept, nor (directly) the political offices or the historical chain of transmission of the office. Perhaps, however, the question should be raised as to whether we need another

alternative or supplementary condition for the legitimate claim to true succession, such as *factual approval*, in order to get hold of the historically significant cases of hereditary succession (cf. Williams's example of The Old Pretender, Williams 2013, 43).

On a related note, it should be added that Lebens has indeed a point when bringing up the idea of counter-factual approval. In many political and religious disputes over true succession, the predecessor's approval is precisely what the rivals consider the decisive category. The rivals will thus agree that true succession is a matter of fact, perhaps they will even both believe that the fact is epistemologically accessible, yet disagree about just how exactly the predecessor's (counter-factual) approval is to be verified (i.e. which of the predecessor's beliefs and/or practices are relevant and how they should be weighted). The reason for their disagreement will then be epistemological in nature.

Concluding Remarks

What these considerations, to expand on Lebens (2013a, 31), ultimately point at, is that the denial of epistemological inaccessibility is just as complementary and equally important an explanation for the existence and intractability of social disputes over true succession as the denial of vagueness. Just as most rivals in such disputes are likely to deny that there can be more than one true successor to a predecessor, they will often believe to know how to verify true succession (think, for instance of the papal infallibility). Actually, it seems to me that when taken together, the denial of epistemological inaccessibility and vagueness form a necessary condition for social disputes over true succession to defy rational solution:

The disbelief of at least one rivalling party in the epistemological inaccessibility and the disbelief of at least one rivalling party in the inherent vagueness of the general idea of true succession taken together, as opposed to individually, constitutes a necessary condition for a religious, political, etc. dispute to last, and perhaps exacerbate into a violent conflict.

If one or more of the rivalling parties assumes that there can only be one true successor, a dispute and potentially violent conflict may, but need not, erupt. Such a situation does not necessarily lead to a dispute in which at least one of the rival parties insists that it, but not its rival(s), is the true successor of some earlier group or person because all parties may agree that there is no way to verify whose claim is correct. The parties involved are bound to tolerate the others. The most they can do is to try "winning" the others "over" by means of deliberation about orthodoxy and orthopraxy (cf. also Asad 1996, 398-402). On the other hand, it is also possible that a dispute is settled even though one (or more) of the parties involved claims to know for sure how to verify whether some person or group is a true successor of some earlier person or group, if it assumes that true succession is a many-one relation and if it (they) reach(es) the conclusion that the sets of practices and/or

beliefs of all rivals are equally qualitatively similar to the predecessor's set of practices and/or beliefs.

However, a necessary condition for a dispute about true succession to possibly lead to a violent conflict is probably that the rivals see in the predecessor's set of beliefs and/or practices something more than a rational authority, which is why academic disputes concerning true succession will usually not (and arguably should not) comprise a potential for violence. Unless the rivals consider true succession to be a hagiographic issue that is commanded by the personal authority of the predecessor, they are unlikely to mount the barricades. Even if Ruben, Rawls, Dworkin, Lukes, or Swanton were equally inclined to claim that only their interpretation of Gallie is correct – to take up an implicit example of disputes over true succession provided by Ruben (2013a, 34) – each of them should abandon their claim to true succession and tolerate, for the sake of academia, that their respective interpretation of Gallie be generally viewed as their own, rather than Gallie's, original theory.

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