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David-Hillel Ruben's 'Traditions and True Successors': A Critical Reply

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In 1988 I became interested in the relationship between the ideas of Confucius and those of Mencius. I noticed that what appeared in one form or other in discussions of this relationship was the unelucidated notion of 'true succession'.[1]

The relation has some interesting features. Nietzsche probably had no true successor and Wittgenstein was not his own true successor. Although Marx was a true successor of Hegel and Lenin was a true successor of Marx, Lenin was not a true successor of Hegel. Thus true succession is not transitive. Zeno was a true successor of Pythagoras, but so too was Parmenides. Thus true succession is a one-to-many relation.

In Williams 1988 I argued that Mencius was not a true successor of Confucius. One argument I opposed is that the *Ta Hsửeh* (the authorship of which is obscure) and the *Chung Yung* are reliable expressions of the ideas of Confucius and since Mencius was a true successor of the author of these two works, it follows that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius (Lu 1983, 81). I observed that this argument is invalid because true succession is non-transitive (Williams 1988, 161). I also proposed an analysis of the relation that I thought would explain this, namely

> An individual B is a true successor of an individual A if and only if

> (1) The central ideas of B were developed after those of A.

> (2) The central ideas of A are consistent with those of B.

> (3) B understood the ideas of A.

> (4) A would, *ceteris paribus,* have developed more or less the same central ideas as those actually developed by B.

> (5) The central ideas of A are not identical with those of B.

In support of (2) I claimed that the late Wittgenstein is no true successor of the early because the Wittgenstein of the *Investigations* could not have consistently held on to a tractarian theory of language. In support of (3) I claimed that, in some sense, the successor is *influenced by* the predecessor. I assumed that the successor's ideas could not have been influenced by those of the predecessor unless the successor understood them. In support of (4) I argued that Plato could not have been a true successor of Socrates unless his ideas were an advancement of those of Socrates. I took (4) to express this claim. In support of (5) I claimed 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

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[1] Chang 1964, 298; Cheng 1974, 8; Cohen 1975, 160-161, 166; Cua 1984 234; Fu 1973 375, 378-379, 382; Hwang 1980, 49; Lai 1984, 55; Lau 1970, 44; Lu 1983, 79.

coincidence, independent minds had arrived at the same view. This would rule out true succession, since an integral idea in true succession is that, in some sense, the successor is influenced by the predecessor.

I then argued that no relation is transitive if the necessary conditions for it to obtain are that some further relation obtains which is itself not transitive. But (2)-(5) are in terms of the relations of consistency, understanding, and non-identity, none of which are transitive. Moreover (4) requires the satisfaction of a conditional that is counterfactual and is thus non-transitive.[2]

David Ruben (2013) gives an analysis of true succession and of tradition. This enables him to diagnose the intractability typically found in disputes in which two groups each claim that it, but not its rival, is in the tradition of some earlier group. What is the source of the dispute? One answer is in terms of ambiguity. Each party means different things by the denotation of the tradition. For example the Shia and the Sunni mean different things by 'Islam'. Then the dispute may be resolved by distinguishing two concepts, say Islam 1 and Islam 2. Ruben observes that this explanation is implausible because it fails to account for the strength of the social struggle (34). The parties to the dispute appear to have more at stake than labels and the importance they attach to them.

Another explanation in terms of vagueness is that the disputants (such as the Sunni and the Shia) might share a single unambiguous concept of the tradition (say, 'Islam') that embeds vague terms (such as 'legitimate successor of the Prophet') variously interpreted (such as 'an elected successor' and 'a successor appointed by the Prophet') leading to varying so-called conceptions (of Islam), while preserving the unambiguity of the core concept (of Islam).

Ruben objects that when different *a priori* conceptions, C1 and C2, are added to an univocal concept X, ambiguity results in the form of two different concepts, XC1 and XC2 (35). Ruben is correct, because if someone has the concept of C1 (say, because she has no concept of election) but not C2 (say, because she has no concept of appointment) while someone else has the concept of C2 but not C1, then they have different concepts of X (in this case, Islam).

He then returns to the concept of true succession, which concerns the beliefs and practices of individuals. In contrast I talked of their 'ideas', a term I took to encompass not only beliefs but also aims, theories and explanations, but not practices. Ruben finds

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[2] In other words, none of the following need be true.

If *p* is consistent with *q* and *q* is consistent with *r*, then p is consistent with *r*.
If A understands the central ideas of B and B understands the central ideas of C, then A understands the central ideas of C.
If A is non-identical to B and B is non-identical to C then A is non-identical to C.
Given that were the case that *p* then it would be the case that *q* and were the case the *q* then it would be the case that *r*, then were the case that *p* then it would be the case that *r*.

my analysis, which is forward-looking in virtue of (4), to be problematic. A counterfactual is true just in case the closest worlds to the actual world in which the antecedent is true are those in which the consequent is true. So (4) is true just in case the closest worlds to the actual world (in which B is alive with his present ideas) in which A has lived to the present are those in which A has developed more or less the same central ideas as those that B has developed. Ruben objects that whether A has developed these ideas depends upon which of his other ideas we hold fixed from when he was alive. But there are many different and incompatible ways in which we may fix these, with the result that it is indeterminate whether (4) is true (38).

I am unsure whether this is a good objection. To determine whether (4) is true we imagine a world in which A has lived until the time at which B is alive that is as similar as logic allows to the actual world at that time. What we hold fixed in this imaginary world is the history of the development of A's ideas at the time of his death. If, in that world, A has developed more or less the same central ideas as those that B has developed, then (4) is true, otherwise it is false. I admit however that 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. In this respect the backward-looking analysis Ruben proposes, that

B is a true successor of A if and only if

(6) B's central beliefs and practices came after those of A and to the extent that

(7) B's central beliefs and practices are qualitatively similar to those of A
(37-38)

is less problematic, since (7) is much easier to decide and is certainly a necessary condition. Moreover 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).

Likewise what now seems important to me for my analysis is not (3) but that in some sense, the successor is *influenced* by the predecessor. Ruben disagrees, claiming that 'It is not implausible to hold that a later thinker, for example, might be the true successor intellectually to the ideas of an earlier thinker, even if the later thinker had never heard of or been in any way influenced by the earlier one' (38). Although 'true succession' might be more of a term of art than 'tradition', I think that this ignores the fact that in some way the successor owes something valuable to her predecessor. This is reflected in the way that Ruben properly takes a 'true successor' to be synonymous with a 'faithful successor'. In one sense of 'true' I remain true to my wife insofar as I remain faithful to her. Likewise I remain true to the aims and central beliefs of socialism insofar as I continue to embrace them. But I cannot continue to *embrace* them if I have never heard of them.

Moreover, unlike 'tradition', 'true successor' is a term of praise. Even if one does not endorse the value of the ideas of a particular thinker, to say that someone is her true successor or is faithful to her ideas is to say something praiseworthy of the successor. It is also to say that the successor owes something to her predecessor. In this respect true succession is like the succession of the monarchs of England, as when we judge that George II but not James Francis Edward Stuart ('The Old Pretender') was the true successor of George I. Being faithful also explains the need for (2). I cannot remain true to the aims and central beliefs of socialism insofar as my own ideas are radically inconsistent with them.

I now see that the reason I gave for the non-transitivity of true succession was mistaken, since it is false that no relation is transitive if the necessary conditions for it to obtain are that some further relation obtains which is itself not transitive. For 'larger than' is transitive but X is larger than Y only if X is not the same size as Y and 'not the same size as' is non-transitive. Ruben gives a better explanation; true succession is a non-transitive and one-to-many relation because so is similarity. A's ideas may be qualitatively similar to B's and B's may be qualitatively similar to C's, without A's being qualitatively similar to C's. Or A's ideas may be qualitatively similar to both those of B and C, even to the same degree, although in different ways (39).

Ruben now turns to the concept of a tradition, which may be intellectual or practical, or an amalgam, although each involves the beliefs and practices of groups. He does not attempt to define 'tradition', but notes that it must last long enough, although how long is inescapably vague (40). He observes that one tradition may be 'nested' within another, as Catholicism is nested within Christianity and that it may have a 'gappy' existence, dying out and then being revived (42). Ruben also claims that when traditions start to exist is vague (42). This is certainly so in many cases, yet there are exceptions. The practical tradition that the first pitch of the USA baseball be thrown by the President originated with Williams Howard Taft on April 14, 1910.[3] One might see the origin of the Christian intellectual tradition as the first acquisition of the beliefs and practices of Jesus by his disciples.

Ruben then proposes that

Group B is in the same tradition of those of Group A if and only if

(8) The central beliefs and practices of A influenced those of B.

(9) The central beliefs and practices of B are qualitatively similar to those of A (44).

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[3] As another example, Queen Victoria originated the practical tradition of wearing a bridal gown in white by wearing one herself at her wedding in 1840 (Ingraham 2008: 60–61).

Vagueness may now be seen as part of the source of disputes over which group belongs to a tradition. If group B but not its rival C belongs to the tradition of A, then the central beliefs and practices of B are much more qualitatively similar to those of A. But how beliefs and practices are to be individuated and counted is vague (44). Moreover B and C may irresolvably disagree over which beliefs and practices are central to A (44). Furthermore a significant portion of the beliefs and practices of both B and C might be qualitatively similar to those of A, but a significant portion of C's are qualitatively *dissimilar* to those of A. B and C may irresolvably disagree over whether this dissimilarity disqualifies C from being in the same tradition as A (44). The problem becomes more acute if each of B and C sets the limits of permissible variation for itself, so that the criteria for membership becomes internal (44) and even more so if the criteria are disputed and prone to change (44). Likewise if B but not its rival C belongs to the tradition of A, then this may be because the beliefs and practices of A influenced those of B much more than those of C. But the degree of influence on B that A needs as well as how much is 'much more' is vague.

I think that this way of identifying the source of dispute is insightful. But I also think that a true successor must 'go beyond' the predecessor's central ideas in developing original ones central to the successor that are at least largely consistent with those of the predecessor while preserving a core of qualitative similarity between them. This is what makes a true successor praiseworthy. Consistency and similarity are independent requirements, because two thinkers may share a common core of ideas, each of which they hold central, while each also holding central another set of ideas that are inconsistent with each other. In contrast, a school of thought may, but need not, go beyond the tradition to which it belongs. A group of disciples of an earlier movement may replicate its central ideas faithfully, neither discarding nor adding to them. This group would certainly belong to the tradition of the earlier movement.

Given my discussion so far, I am inclined to propose the following.

> An individual B is a true intellectual successor of an individual A if and only if

>> B's central ideas were developed after those of A and the central ideas of B are largely consistent with those of A, largely similar to them, yet a valuable advancement over them, because they were influenced by them

whereas

> Group B is in the same intellectual tradition as Group A if and only if

>> B's central ideas were developed after those of A and the central ideas of B are largely consistent with those of A and largely similar to them, because they were influenced by them.

This analysis explains why the Sunni do not belong to the tradition of the Shia, since they hold inconsistent beliefs about the legitimate successor of the Prophet.

This gives us a way of relating true succession to a school of thought's membership of a tradition. One case is when there is a tradition of following the ideas of its founder. Then a true successor of that founder emerges and a new tradition evolves that follows the ideas of the true successor, with the result that the new tradition belongs to the older one, yet goes beyond it.

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