

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection School of Social Sciences

School of Social Sciences

1-2013

Further Reflection on True Successors and Traditions

John N. WILLIAMS

Singapore Management University, johnwilliams@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research



Part of the [Epistemology Commons](#)

Citation

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

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/1365

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Social Sciences at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection School of Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylids@smu.edu.sg.

Further Reflection on True Successors and Traditions
John Williams, Singapore Management University

In his "Reply to Williams" (2013), a response to my "David-Hillel Ruben's 'Traditions and True Successors': A Critical Reply." (2013), David Ruben reports that there is much that we disagree about concerning the nature of true succession. I am not entirely persuaded by what he says of these disagreements.

I claimed that in some sense a true successor must be influenced by her predecessor (Williams 2013, 42) and I proposed an analysis of true succession, namely that

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 (Williams 2013, 44).

By 'central ideas' I meant not only beliefs but also aims, theories and explanations. Ruben objects, arguing that influence is a not necessary condition for true succession 'because it is perfectly correct to say that, for example, the true successors of the Luddites are certain groups of anti-global capitalist activists, even if the latter have never heard of the former' (Ruben 2013, 8). I am not persuaded, because in his original "Traditions and true successors." (2013), Ruben frequently uses 'true successor' as a synonym of 'faithful successor'. This was the sense of 'true successor' I had in mind in my original "Confucius, Mencius and the notion of true succession" (Williams 1988) in which I reported (Williams 1988, 158) Whalen Lai as supporting the view that Mencius was a true successor of Confucius because 'he remained faithful to Confucius' (Lai 1988, 55). I said that it was proper of Ruben to use 'true successor' as a synonym of 'faithful successor' (Williams 2013, 42). I added that

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 (Williams 2013, 42).

In his recent (2013) rejoinder Ruben does not address this objection. It still seems correct to me. Surely modern anti-global-capitalist activists cannot remain faithful to the ideas of the Luddites if they have never heard of their ideas.

Nor, it seems to me, can they remain faithful to these ideas if they are not influenced by them, at least to the extent that an understanding of them results in their adoption. Analogously, my wife has a causal role in my remaining faithful to her. I am faithful to her insofar as I am influenced by her. Of course I might refrain from extra-marital affairs for other reasons, such as fear of scandal, but that would not count remaining faithful in the deepest sense of the word. It seems then 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.

Being faithful also explains the need for the true successor's central ideas to be largely consistent with those of her predecessor. Modern anti-global-capitalist activists cannot remain faithful to the central ideas of the Luddites if their own central ideas are not largely consistent with them.

Given that true successors are faithful successors, it follows that 'true successor' is a term of praise — a conclusion that Ruben seems reluctant to endorse — because 'faithful' is certainly a term of praise. Even 'true' considered in isolation seems to be a term of praise or achievement, as in 'Jack is a true friend', 'Joan is true to the movement' or 'After adjusting the spokes you've made the front wheel run true'. Moreover we could not find value in being truthful unless we valued saying what is true.

I took this to support two claims, first that '[e]ven 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' and that '[i]t is also to say that the successor owes something to her predecessor' (Williams 2013, 42). On reflection I am now much less sure of this first claim. It might be objected that we could judge that certain modern neo-Nazis are true successors of Hitler, and are faithful to his central ideas. Given that we reject Hitler's ideology, would we judge the modern neo-Nazis to be praiseworthy insofar as they are faithful? The answer seems controversial, rather like the question of whether there is anything of intrinsic value in someone's loyalty to a movement one abhors, such as the Ku Klux Klan. A safer claim is that judging someone to be a true or faithful successor of the predecessor involves a commitment to judging her praiseworthy provided the predecessor's central ideas are praiseworthy.

Ruben also takes issue with my original claim that

If the central ideas of A and B were in fact identical we would say that at worst one was guilty of plagiarism and that at best, by a rare coincidence, independent minds had arrived at the same view. This would clearly rule out true succession, since an integral idea in succession is that, in some sense, the successor is influenced by the predecessor (Williams 1988, 158).

He replies that 'even in the case of the so-called plagiarist, I am not sure that we do not want to rule out as a bona fide example of true succession the sycophant who repeats the master's views in their entirety, albeit with some paraphrase or changed formulation or expression' (Ruben 2013, 9).

My response is that there are cases and cases. A plagiarist is a kind of thief of ideas, someone who uses a predecessor's ideas as if they were his own. The worst of these does so with no understanding of them. What influences him is not his acceptance of the predecessor's central ideas but the expectation of personal gain from the misappropriation of their outward form. Such a person is not only dishonest but culpably

stupid. He is untrue to his predecessor as well as to the pursuit of truth. Like the Great Pretender, he is unworthy of succession. Compare him with a disciple of Confucius who fully understands the central teachings of the Master and who as a result, sincerely and accurately disseminates these, neither adding nor subtracting from them, while scrupulously acknowledging them to be the Master's own. What influences her is her acceptance of the predecessor's central ideas. She surely has more of a claim to be a true or faithful successor.

But is the claim enough to be endorsed? Unlike the uncomprehending plagiarist, the disciple has in a sense made the Master's ideas her own, although these remain his as well. But she has not made any theoretical advance. We might call her a true successor, but what succeeds the Master is not anything of any more value than what was succeeded. As Ruben observes, what counts as a theoretical advance might be difficult to decide (Ruben 2013, 9), although other cases are clear-cut. For example, Einstein's ideas were certainly a theoretical advance over Newton's, partly because of their influence. But if a second disciple were to resemble the first yet also make a theoretical advance then surely she would be more praiseworthy still. I think that we need a term to denote such a thinker and I think we sometimes use 'true successor'. We could of course coin another term to denote the first disciple, perhaps 'true follower', which makes it clear that there need be no ideological development.

Ruben gives a second objection to my analysis of true succession:

First, I assume the 'because' is the 'because' of causation or explanation. In the case of his account of true successor, it isn't clear whether Williams intends the scope of the explanandum that influence is meant to explain to be (a) similarity or (b) similarity and advancement or (c) just advancement. Influence isn't a good explanation of any of (a)-(c). Influence can cause someone to hold dissimilar ideas: Hegel's idealism was a major influence on Marx's rejection of idealism and adoption of historical materialism. Moreover, certainly some earlier thinker can influence a later thinker to adopt less advanced ideas (Ruben 2013, 8).

I think that Ruben has misunderstood me and that I should have been clearer. The 'because' is that of explanation and its scope is meant to be consistency, similarity and advancement. I agree that influence need not be a good explanation of any three, but that it *is* part of a good explanation is supposed to be stipulated as a necessary condition of true succession. In this respect my analysis is like Linda Zagzebski's analysis of an act of intellectual virtue:

An act is an act of intellectual virtue *I* just in case it arises from the motivational component of *I*, is something a person with *I* would characteristically do in the circumstances, and is successful in leading to the immediate end of *I* and to the truth *because* of these features of the act (Zagzebski 2000, 175, my italics).

A clearer formulation is

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 at least part of the reason why the central ideas of B are largely consistent with those of A, largely similar to them, yet a valuable advancement over them, is that they were influenced by them.

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. Likewise a clearer formulation of my original analysis of sameness of intellectual tradition (Williams 2013, 44) is:

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 at least part of the reason why the central ideas of B are largely consistent with those of A and largely similar to them, is because they were influenced by them.

This accommodates the fact that a school of thought *may, but need not*, represent a theoretical advance (Williams 2013, 44), contrary to Ruben's characterization of my original analysis as 'similarity because influenced by, but without advancement' (Ruben 2013, 8).

Finally, Ruben raises the interesting case of

... the true successor who produces a retrograde or degenerate version of an earlier body of ideas. It might be that some of the neo-Aristotelians of late antiquity produced a version of Aristotelianism that was less of an advancement and more of a retreat from the classical position of Aristotle. It might have been problematically concessive or eclectic (Ruben 2013, 9).

On my view, this case is easily tractable. Such a person is not a true successor because ideas that are retrograde with respect to those central to the predecessor cannot constitute advancement. Moreover, one way in which her ideas may be problematically eclectic is in being an unusual mix that is inconsistent with those central to the predecessor. And surely 'retrograde' 'degenerate' and 'problematic' are not terms of praise, unlike 'true or faithful successor'.

Contact details: johnwilliams@smu.edu.sg

References

Lai, Whalen. 1984. "Kao Tzu and Mencius on mind: Analyzing a paradigm shift in classical China." *Philosophy East and West* 34 (2): 147-160.

Williams, John. 2013. "Further Reflection on True Successors and Traditions."
Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective 2 (9) 12-16.
<http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-Ww>

Ruben, David-Hillel. 2013. "Traditions and true successors." *Social Epistemology* 27 (1): 32-46.

Ruben, David-Hillel. 2013. "Reply to Williams." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (8): 8-9

Williams, John. 2013. "David-Hillel Ruben's 'Traditions and True Successors': A critical reply." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (7): 40-45.

Williams, John. 1988. "Confucius, Mencius and the notion of true succession." *Philosophy East and West* 38 (2): 157-71.

Zagzebski, Linda. 2000. "Précis of virtues of the mind." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (1): 169-177.