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. 1 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. 2 Identity,

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1 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.

2 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. One might try to define membership in the analytic tradition in terms of qualitative similarity to the beliefs and practices of its originators, 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 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.

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.

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)

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5 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 SY because of its similarity/dissimilarity to SX.

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 SY from SX as a radical one, radical enough to render SY 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 SY is highly similar to SX, X sees SY as being radically different from SX. 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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References


