

Addressing Ruben’s “Internal and External Perspectives”
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In his reply, David-Hillel Ruben ([2014](#)) argues that “internal perspectives” on disputes over true succession (i.e. of the parties involved) might well rely on counterfactuals, but that “external perspectives” (i.e. of scholars) ought to dispense with them because they are hard to verify.

I think Ruben is right in this regard. Moreover, I do not wish to object to his overall argument that social disputes over true succession are intractable because true succession is inherently vague. However, I still tend to consider Ruben’s account incomplete because the category of vagueness alone does not fully explain why disputes over true succession are essentially contestable.

Ruben brings up the following hypothetical case: Two rivals in a dispute over true succession, having read his ([Ruben 2013](#)) article, are both convinced that true succession is inherently vague. They agree that theoretically there may be more than one true successor of the revered originator. Ruben thinks that “the recognition of vagueness is not likely to end the dispute between the parties” (Ruben 2014, 55), and empirically speaking, he is probably right. But the theoretical question is why the dispute is unlikely to be ended in spite of the recognition of vagueness, and under what conditions the recognition of vagueness might force one of the disputants to abandon his or her claim to true succession.

Imagine that the disputants, after acknowledging the possibility of multiple equally true successors, insist on their respective claim to true succession, arguing that their respective beliefs are more like the earlier paradigm than the rival’s. They might do so for various reasons, “internal” as well as “external” ones. Concerning the former, they might justify their claim by reference to exclusive divine revelation, and so the dispute is doomed to defy rational resolution. At best, the disputants could agree to tolerate or ignore each other’s claims. However, especially in non-religious (e.g. scholarly) disputes over true succession, the disputants will usually consider reference to non-rational knowledge illegitimate, and thus agree that an “external” arbitrator (i.e. rationality) is the adequate instance to assess the legitimacy of claims. If so, “internal” and “external” perspectives merge, and what is more, the dispute can well be ended in a rational way: A comparative analysis of the propositional content of the writings of the originator and each disputant may reveal that one rival’s writings objectively exhibit a greater degree of qualitative similarity than the other’s.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this consideration: Firstly, even though theoretically speaking there are numerous possibilities for true succession in every single case, most empirical disputes are susceptible to rational resolution unless the writings of two disputants turn out to have the same degree of qualitative similarity with the originator’s writings, which is unlikely to say the least. Secondly, we should not assume that the

unwillingness of disputants to acknowledge the inherent vagueness of true succession and reluctance to let rational analysis decide the issue is the reason why many social disputes are so intractable. Much more likely, the disputants sustain their respective claim to true succession in spite of a commitment to the authority of rationality because they rely on *different rational methods* of assessing qualitative similarity.

The comparative analysis of propositional content is certainly a reasonably rational method of assessing qualitative similarity, despite the various criticisms that have been levelled against this “Oxford approach” (Skinner et al. 2002). Yet a great variety of methods of interpretation as theorized and practiced in literary criticism as well as the history of philosophy and political thought are viable candidates, too. (Post-structuralist approaches that proclaim the death of the author as well as certain reader-response approaches are probably exceptions.) Each approach may reveal more than one possible way of being faithful to an originator, which is why vagueness is an important part of a comprehensive explanation of the intractable nature of social disputes, and vagueness may ultimately also lie at the ground of the multiplicity of methods of interpretation. (If so, in the final analysis, many social disputes over true succession might be reducible to the on-going scholarly controversy about the appropriate way of reconstructing the meaning of a text.) Yet unless different methods of interpretation are adopted, a social dispute will usually be capable of rational resolution.

On a related note, to conclude, one might ask whether approaches that aim at ascertaining the authorial intention of texts are not fairly reasonable attempts to operationalize in a scholarly manner the category of counter-factual approval, and may thus – contrary to what I admitted above – be a legitimate part of “external perspectives.”

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References

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