

A Further Reply to Beckstein

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In Gallie’s (1956) view, in order for there to be essential contested-ness, the game the exemplar team played must be internally complex. The game could be assessed on multiple criteria — e.g., style of play, speed, distinctive method of play, strategy —and so on. Even after it was pointed out to them that there could be multiple true successors, each of the two successor teams might argue that it, and not the other, was the true successor of the exemplar, and both (let us suppose) could cite the same number of different features that it carried over from the exemplar’s game.

But even if the two successor teams could agree that there was a certain vagueness in the idea of the true successor of the exemplar team, they could continue the argument with opposing views about which of the features were more important, more central. They might each find contradictory things the members of the exemplar team said that gave prominence to one feature over another. Or they might argue for the greater importance of one feature over another on external grounds: the importance of supporters’ interest and involvement, aesthetic considerations, the underlying but unarticulated point of the game. In that way, and others, I don’t think that recognition of vagueness would bring rational dispute to a halt, either internally by the participants in the teams or by the external observers.

I want to pick up on two points that Beckstein (2014) makes, which I did not consider or deal with and which I find helpful.

First, Beckstein suggests that the idea of authorial intent might be a way of thinking about the plausibility of a backwards-looking counterfactual approach: ‘What did the exemplar mean when it wrote or said ...?’ I agree that this is worth pursuing.

Second, he raises a more general issue with which I did not deal: textual interpretation. I tended to ignore issues of textual interpretation and indeed referred to texts only once in my article, in connection with the way a tradition might lay ‘dormant’ for a period, being kept alive only in a text. But clearly, especially in the case of a tradition that is text-centred, as with many religious traditions in particular, essentially contested-ness may arise over interpretive issues about the meaning of texts. Both written and spoken words are merely physical items, marks or sounds, which need to be assigned meaning. This isn’t an issue I can deal with in a short reply but it is good to have Beckstein remind us of the importance of this point in an overall treatment of these sorts of disputes.

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References

- Gallie, Walter Bryce. “Essentially Contested Concepts.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956): 167-198.
- Beckstein, Martin. “Addressing Ruben’s ‘Internal and External Perspectives’.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 5 (2014): 35-36.