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# Traditions and True Successors

David-Hillel Ruben

*How can different parties to a dispute in aesthetics, history, politics or religion, either individuals or groups, each claim, apparently with at least some justification, that it, but not its rival(s), is the true or authentic successor or later representative for some earlier group or individual, or that it, but not its rival(s), stands in the same authentic tradition as the earlier one? Such social disputes seem essentially endless and interminable. Is this so? Can the disputes receive a rational resolution? I try and illustrate these disputes with numerous specific examples. I focus on the two concepts of tradition and true succession for my analysis. The idea of qualitative similarity of beliefs and practices can illuminate social disputes over true succession or membership of a tradition. (Causal connexion has a necessary role to play.) Other analyses frequently identify the vagueness or ambiguity in the concepts of the specific traditions as the source of dispute. On the contrary, I argue that the vagueness inherent in the question of how similar beliefs and practices need to be is what explains these apparently endless disputes that social groups have with one another over these questions.*

*Keywords: Traditions; True Succession; Social Disputes*

How can different parties to a dispute each claim, apparently with at least some justification, that it, but not its rival(s), stands in the same authentic tradition as some earlier representative of that tradition? The purposes of this paper are twofold. First, I want to develop, or begin to develop, a conceptual structure for dealing adequately with questions of this type. Second, I want to diagnose why such disputes are so intractable. I avoid the diagnosis of ambiguity of the disputed concepts as an explanation for that intractability. I conclude by offering an alternative account.

One example of this type of dispute was the cold war dispute over the meaning of “democracy” between socialists and liberal democrats. Was it the socialist or capitalist countries that were the real inheritors of the Athenian ideal of democracy? Is it participatory or representative democracy that is the true successor to the Athenian ideal? That particular dispute has lost most of its vigour, but the contemporary world is rife with disputes of this kind, especially religious and

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David-Hillel Ruben is an emeritus professor of Philosophy and Honorary Research Fellow in the University of London, London, UK. Email: [david.ruben1@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:david.ruben1@yahoo.co.uk)

political disputes which literally tear some societies apart. Just who are the authentic followers of Mohammed today, the Shia or Sunni? Is Cuba still a Marxist-Leninist State? Do Reconstructionist Jews represent a legitimate approach to Judaism? The reader might not of course agree with any of the specific examples brought in this paper. But the main and surely uncontentious point is that social conflict takes many forms, and that one of its most robust and enduring forms is dispute over questions pertaining to the legitimacy of belonging to a particular tradition, to numerically one and the same tradition.

### Some Methodological Remarks

Sometimes, it seems apparent that questions of this sort are settled by power struggles. Such social disputes are often, perhaps mostly, settled by considerations of sheer brute force. The stronger of the contenders wins and runs the loser out of town. It can hardly be denied that this frequently happens. But no account of this is taken in the following analytic treatment of these disputes. These disputes are discussed from the point of view of normative reason, as it were: which of the two parties, if either, has a stronger argument, which of the two has a better-justified claim? Looking at a power struggle while asking which of the sides has a better claim may allow us to make normative judgements about the actual outcomes. An example of this might be the struggle between Stalin and Trotsky over Lenin's inheritance, in which the former won but the latter appears to have had the better claim. In general, the group that is better entitled, or equally entitled, to be considered the authentic representative of a certain tradition or the true successor to an earlier pivotal figure does not always obtain this recognition.

As a first move, one might try and characterise these disputes as really only disputes about the meaning of the disputed concept: Islam, democracy, Christianity, Leninism or whatever. One such account of these disputes might put them down merely to the fallacy of equivocation with respect to the disputed concept; once the ambiguity is identified, say by identifying two meanings for the word "democracy" or "Islam", the dispute would then in principle be capable of resolution. This approach purports to resolve the disputes by multiplying meanings and hence concepts.

If the dispute only showed us that the parties to the dispute meant different things by the original label, "X" ("Islam", or "democracy" or "Leninism" for example), then "X" would be ambiguous and the dispute easily resolved by distinguishing two concepts, the concept  $X_1$  and the concept  $X_2$ , where one thought initially there was only one concept. The dispute understood in this way would have a rational resolution. Given the commitment each party has to the original label, "Islam" or "democracy" or "Leninism", the parties might not be attracted by the rational resolution, since each might wish to persist with the ambiguity and claim for itself alone the ambiguous label. But still there would be a rational resolution, whether accepted or not by the disputants.

In what follows, an account of these disputes will be offered that does not attribute ambiguity or equivocation to the terms being disputed. This diagnosis of ambiguity seems unlikely as an explanation of the social disputes of the kind listed above. More appears to be at stake than what this diagnosis presupposes. If ambiguity is what is at issue, it is hard to account for the strength of the social struggle over the attribution of the term, even given the positive evaluative force that each party attributes to the original but allegedly ambiguous label. One should not dismiss a priori the view that people are willing to die over mere labels and the value they attach to them. But if a more convincing explanation for their dying can be found, so much the better.

Let us start the discussion by using an entirely artificial example of game championship, introduced into the literature by W.B. Gallie some time ago, in which two teams at a later time  $t^*$ , say B and C, both claim to be the true champions, the real champions, at some game, because each says that the way it plays the game more fully reflects (when compared to its rival) the way in which the exemplar team, A, to which they both wish to remain true, played the game at the earlier time,  $t$  (Gallie 1956, 1964, chap. 8). Above all else, Gallie was interested in the phenomenon of intractable social disputes. The aim of this paper is to continue the discussion that Gallie began, remaining faithful to the central question about which he wrote. The paper is not an attempt at exegesis of Gallie's specific way of dealing with that question, let alone an attempt at commenting on the subsequent writing inspired by his idea of essential contestedness. Indeed, I take the discussion in a direction quite different from most of those who used Gallie's idea of essentially contested concepts in their own work.

Later writers often made extensive use of the distinction between "concepts" and "conceptions". The idea is that the disputants might share a single unambiguous concept, X, but have different conceptions of X. On one account of this distinction, the concept of X would have a common core accepted by all parties to the dispute, but a common core which employed such vague terms as "arbitrary" or "rational" or "proper balance", and where such terms were open to various interpretations, leading to varying so-called conceptions, while preserving the unambiguity of the core concept. Other terms were used in place of "a conception": "a theory", "an instantiation" or "an interpretation".

The distinction between a concept and a conception is only mentioned in Gallie's own writings en passant (Gallie 1956, 176). But various writers then used and developed the distinction in order both to explain how essential contestedness might occur and to apply that idea to an increasingly long list of alleged examples of essential contestedness.<sup>1</sup> John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Steven Lukes and Christine Swanton use the distinction between concept and conception, or one similar to it, to discuss such ideas as justice, fairness, power and freedom (Dworkin 1972; Lukes 1974; Rawls 1971, 5–6; Swanton 1992). This diagnosis of essential contestedness retains the idea of the univocality or unambiguity of the concept: there is only one concept of X ("justice", "freedom" and "Islam"). But it still locates the source

of the disputes in something about the specific ideas of justice, freedom or Islam, namely in their varying conceptions.

Does this account leave us with a single, unambiguous concept? I have my doubts. In general, two disputants can certainly hold two different conceptions or theories about those things to which some (univocal) concept,  $X$ , applies; scientific examples of this abound. Supporters of Ptolemy and Galileo did not differ over the meaning of “the sun”. But the sorts of disputes about which Gallie writes are not empirical and the different conceptions held by the disputants are not a posteriori. In many instances, as for example, in Rawls’ case in which differing principles of justice held by different disputants provide the differing “conceptions” of justice, these theories or interpretations or conceptions are a priori, to be established by philosophical argument. In these cases, there is every reason to think that, when different conceptions, for example,  $C_1$  and  $C_2$ , are added to an univocal concept  $X$ , ambiguity results. What we have are two different concepts,  $XC_1$  and  $XC_2$ .

More importantly, I believe one can discuss what concerned Gallie almost without using the concept of a concept, let alone the concept of a conception. My diagnosis of essential contestedness will, in contrast to those earlier discussions, locate the source of the disputes elsewhere, and not as a dispute specifically about the specific concepts or conceptions themselves. My diagnosis will focus on vagueness rather than ambiguity.

### The Paradigm Example

Let us return to the artificial example of game championship introduced by Gallie. Although artificial, Gallie’s example of game championship will permit the development of the terminology needed to understand social disputes of the kind described, and it is for that reason that I choose it to initiate the discussion. The artificial example can serve as a neat model for theorising real cases of social dispute about the membership of traditions. This approach does not assume the strong view that every dispute about which of the competing parties to the dispute legitimately belong to the tradition in question can be modelled in this way. But it certainly assumes that many such disputes can be.

In the artificial example, both  $B$  and  $C$  at  $t^*$  claim to be carrying on the tradition of playing the same game that  $A$  played at  $t$ , much as  $A$  did, or both claim to be  $A$ ’s true successor at playing the game, faithful to  $A$ ’s way of playing, and both claim that the other is not or does not do so. It need not be assumed that team  $A$  was the first to play the game or that the game originated in any way with  $A$ . Traditions do not typically have, after all, easily identifiable originators or first members. All that is required is that both  $B$  and  $C$  regard  $A$  as an undisputed and paradigmatic player of the game at some earlier time.

Team  $A$ , the exemplar, displayed a complex set of skills in playing the game (say, a certain style, speed, distinctive method, strategy and so on) and as a consequence  $A$ ’s play was multifaceted. For the example to work, achievement or success

in playing the game must be of an internally complex kind, as Gallie himself stressed. Each of the subsequent teams will stress and develop a different aspect of that earlier, paradigmatic way to play the game. There will be some divergence between B and C because of the different techniques of game play each stresses from the set that characterised A's play. Both B and C claim to be the true or real champions at the game, because each can harp back, in different ways, to specific features that A's play embodied and that it regards as the most important, and that only it, and not the other team, has continued, developed and perfected.

Two ideas have been employed thus far, in describing the artificial example: the ideas of tradition and true succession. But whatever will be said about traditions and true successors, some conceptually prior building blocks are required and those building blocks are people and groups of people (Gallie's own example is in terms of teams).

What are of interest about people, for this discussion at any rate, are two salient facts about them: people have beliefs, and act in certain set ways or recognisable patterns. There is a great deal that could be said about these concepts of belief and ways of acting (so for example, it must be assumed that dispositional beliefs as well as so-called occurrent ones are included), but the ordinary notion of a belief and the way in which something is done will be taken for granted, unanalysed, in what follows. I frequently refer to "the way in which something is done" as a "practice".

### **Faithfulness or True Succession**

John Williams, in one of the very few philosophical articles on true succession and related issues, restricts his analysis to individual thinkers, but true succession and faithfulness are used here in such a way that either individuals or groups can be the relevant unit, as was implicitly assumed in the discussion above (Williams 1988). By "a group's having beliefs and practices", what is meant is only that all, or most, or most of the most significant (or some such) people in the group have those beliefs or practices.<sup>2</sup>

Faithfulness or true succession is clearly not the same concept as the purely temporal idea of succession. Christianity was the successor to the Roman religion but hardly its true successor. In being a person's or a group's true successor, to what about them is one truly succeeding or being faithful? It is natural to suppose that true succession, or faithfulness, of one person or group by or to another supervenes somehow on sameness of beliefs held by those groups or people and of the practices in which they engage. Someone is faithful, or a true successor, to the beliefs or to the practices or to both the beliefs and practices of another insofar as they have qualitatively similar ones. True succession and faithfulness come in degrees. A later person or group can, in their beliefs and practices, be more or less faithful to an earlier group or person, the more they share those earlier beliefs and practices.<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, a later person or group claims continuity with an earlier one on the vaguer grounds of carrying on with the same set of attitudes or acting in the

same spirit as the earlier group or person. Ultimately, such vaguer considerations must also be anchored in the beliefs and practices that the groups or persons share, on the grounds that there simply is nothing else in which they could be anchored.

For diachronic questions of the sort addressed in this paper, qualitative similarity takes a particular form: degree of faithfulness or true succession. A later person or group is more faithful to an earlier person or group, or is its true successor (and not vice versa), the more the latter's beliefs and practices are qualitatively similar to the earlier's beliefs and practices (and not vice versa). Qualitative similarity is a symmetric idea, but true succession or faithfulness is asymmetric.

The earlier person or group sets the standard by which the later is to be judged, for which there is no analogue in a synchronic case. The aim is to know not just how similar the earlier and later are to one another, but specifically how faithful the later is to the earlier. The earlier has a paradigmatic role by which the later is to be judged. The more similar the beliefs and practices of a later group are to those of an earlier group, the more faithful the later is to the former.

True succession and faithfulness are backwards-looking ideas. There is an asymmetry based on time. A later person or group bears those relations to an earlier one, and not vice versa. It might not have been this way. Traditional inheritance might have been conceived differently, as teleological, forwards looking. An "Hegelian" approach to traditions might have been the dominant way of thinking about traditions.<sup>4</sup> The beliefs and practices of a group-at-the-later-time  $t^*$  could have been taken as the exemplar, and the question might then have been about which of two groups' beliefs and practices at some earlier time  $t$  better match those of the latter group. Instead of degree of faithfulness to a past exemplar, one would have spoken about degree of potentiality or ease for something to develop in a certain direction. True succession and faithfulness would be replaced by the idea of progression.

Williams' analysis of true succession is an example of such a forwards-looking approach (Williams 1988, 159). One of the necessary conditions for B's being a true successor to A on his analysis is this: "A would, *ceteris paribus*, have developed more or less the same central ideas as those actually developed by B". The idea here is that if A, who lived before B, had been alive when B was alive, A would have believed (or done) more or less what B believes (or does).

When one produces a counterfactual, say "if  $c$  had not occurred,  $e$  would not have occurred", the truth conditions for the conditional require that the conditional is true (i.e.  $e$  does not occur) in the closest possible non- $c$  world to the actual world—the world just like the actual world except that  $c$  (and anything that logically follows from  $c$ 's non-occurrence) does not occur.

The problem for Williams is this: the counterfactual he requires in his forwards-looking approach must claim that in the closest possible world to the actual world, call it  $w$ , in which A is still alive when B is, but everything else remains the same as it is in the actual world (so that B continues to believe or do what he believes or does in the actual world), A's beliefs or practices would be the same as,

or at least very similar to, what B believes or does. But if we hold everything fixed in  $w$  except A's now being alive (because in the actual world he is not alive when B is but in the closest possible world we are imagining, he is alive at that time), we would hold all of A's beliefs fixed too, as they were when he was alive at some earlier time, which would not help at all. That is merely the backwards-looking approach in a new guise.

What Williams must be envisaging is that we change A's beliefs and practices from what they actually were when he was alive at the earlier time, in light of the current changed circumstances in  $w$  in which A would find himself, were he to be alive when B is. But how A would revise his beliefs and practices in the counterfactual situation depends on which beliefs and practices he would hold fixed and which he would change ... and there are many different and incompatible ways in which to do that.

In light of the many alternative and incompatible sets of beliefs and practices that A has available to him in  $w$ , it is simply indeterminate which particular set of beliefs and practices A would choose. The counterfactuals need this form: "if A were now alive and A held fixed beliefs  $b_1, b_2, b_3$ , etc. (and the same for practices) but changed some of his other beliefs and practices, A's beliefs would (or would not) resemble those of B". But there will be many such counterfactuals, some true and some false, each one of which holding a different set of beliefs and practices fixed. Holding some of A's former beliefs and practices fixed and allowing the others to vary, A's new complete set of his beliefs and practices may be similar to B's, but holding other of A's beliefs and practices fixed, and hence permitting still others to vary, A's new complete set of beliefs and practices may be less similar or even not very similar at all to B's.

If we are comparing the similarity of A's new set of beliefs and practices in the counterfactual situation  $w$  to two contending later disputants, B and C, the problem of choice of which beliefs and practices to hold fixed and which to allow to vary becomes even more acute. Given some of A's choices, A's beliefs and practices will resemble B's more than C's; given other of his choices, they will resemble C's more than B's. My backwards-looking approach in terms of qualitative similarity of the (actual) latter to the (actual) earlier avoids these problems arising from the counterfactuals that Williams' forwards-looking approach requires.

Qualitative similarity, even with the temporal unidirectionality added, may be necessary for true succession but is it also sufficient for it? Consider first an imaginary case discussed by Bevir (2002). Suppose historians of ideas find that Chinese Buddhists and American Indians held ideas that closely resemble those of modern anarchists. The assumption in Bevir's case is that neither of the earlier groups had the slightest influence or impact on the anarchists or is relevant in answering the question of why the modern anarchists believe what they do.

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. One might argue (say) that those who held radical views about democracy and individual



rights in the French Revolution were the true successors to many of those who engaged in some of the peasant revolts of the mediaeval period, even if the former had never heard of the latter. It would then be a matter of convergence of ideas or practices, in a sense similar to biological convergence when two wholly unrelated species develop a similar feature or characteristic. In any event, we need *some* way in which to express the thought that a later group's beliefs and practices are similar to an earlier ones, without there having been any influence by the latter on the former, and I will let true succession be the way in which to express that idea.

True succession (and faithfulness) are (1) non-transitive, (2) many–one relations (in truth, they are many–many relations but this further complication has no relevance here). These features follow from the fact that the core of true succession and faithfulness is the idea of similarity.

- (1) The ideas of succession and faithfulness are not transitive, in a way similar to that in which memory is not transitive. Person or group C at  $t^{**}$  can be the successor or highly faithful to B at  $t^*$ , and B at  $t^*$  can be the successor or highly faithful to A at  $t$ , but C not be the true successor or faithful to A. Just as memories can weaken and fade over time for the case of persons,<sup>5</sup> so can the degree of faithfulness and succession that links past and future individuals or groups of individuals weaken.
- (2) If B is the true successor to or faithful to A, does it follow that no distinct group C, co-temporal with B, but having somewhat different beliefs and practices from B, can also be a true successor of or faithful to A? There is no reason to think that this is so. Succession and faithfulness are many–one relations (like Parfit's (1984, 206 and ff) psychological continuity and connectedness relations): many distinct groups or thinkers, with different thoughts, ideas, practices, or whatever, might all be true successors of or faithful to A. After all, the beliefs and practices of both B and C can be highly qualitatively similar to A's, even if not identical to one another's. Group A may have a multiplicity of equally true or faithful successors. True succession is a branching concept; indeed, the historical reality of transmission of beliefs and practices from group to group is one of perpetual fission.

### Traditions

The questions addressed here might easily make use of a number of similar concepts: cultures, ideologies, systems of belief, movements, ways of life, practices, world views, schools of thought and so on. Although these concepts share some important similarities, they certainly are not identical and it is best to confine the discussion to only the idea of tradition. The concept of tradition is singled out for treatment here because of the salient role it plays in the kinds of social disputes that have been identified.

Although the main question I will address has to do with the identity of a tradition over time, there are also serious and non-trivial questions about how to individuate traditions. A fact about traditions of which I take little account here is the way in which traditions can “nest” and “traverse” one another. For example, one might speak of the Christian tradition. Within that tradition, one might identify a subtradition, say, the Catholic tradition. So two movements may belong to the same wider tradition—they might both be Christian—but one may have broken away from the Catholic tradition, of which it is no longer a part. At an even higher level of generality, one might speak of the tradition of Western monotheism. Averroes and Maimonides may belong to the same philosophical tradition but not to the same specific religious tradition, even if they both belong to the more general tradition of Western monotheism.

There are many different kinds of traditions,<sup>6</sup> in addition to the religious and political traditions mentioned so far: artesian traditions (like salt production, or gold extraction); (purely) intellectual traditions (like Platonism or empiricism); traditions of practice (like child-rearing or yoga). Some of these traditions embody mainly know-how; others have more of an element of theoretical knowledge as a component. The borders between these different sorts of traditions, and between them and cultures, ways of life, etc. are blurred and easily merge into one another. The sort of disputes that have been identified as of interest in this paper are mostly cases of traditions which are amalgams of beliefs and practices, but the argument of the paper will apply equally to traditions that are mostly belief traditions, to traditions that are mostly practice traditions, as well as to the kinds that are amalgams.

Groups or people are (to use a neutral term) bearers of traditions; traditions involve people and groups. This is a truism. This thought does not presuppose any view about the reduction of traditions to people or groups thereof, although it is consistent with it. People, or groups of people, engage in practices and have beliefs, and so they are the bearers of these traditions.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of a tradition has an interesting historical feature. The idea of a tradition existing only for a single moment of time is conceptually absurd. Here is a very weak condition on the idea of a tradition: if a tradition exists at all, there must be at least two distinct times,  $t$  and  $t^*$ , at which it exists. Traditions have at least one historical property essentially. In fact, more than this rather weak constraint can be required, although it is hard to specify what is involved in this “more”.  $t^*$  must not be too temporally close to  $t$  either. “Not too temporally close” is vague and it is difficult to be any more precise or unambiguous than that. A tradition that lasts for only 5 min is an absurdity.

In this regard, we need to distinguish between the kinds of social traditions in which Gallie was interested and the personal or local traditions that might apply, for example, to a small group of friends who decide to meet regularly over a period of time. Although traditions of both types have at least one historical property essentially, it is social traditions that last a very long time. Bevir (2002, 204) claims for example that such traditions are intergenerational. Shils is even more specific: a

tradition “has to last over at least three generations—however long or short these are—to be a tradition (Shils 1981, 15).” Without committing to these specific claims, we can say: social traditions not only have some temporal breadth, as do all traditions, but also have significant temporal breadth.

When do traditions begin to exist? There are times at which they clearly do exist and times at which they clearly do not. But it is not clear when they start to exist. But this vagueness of origin is not a unique feature of traditions. Consider an artefact, a clock for instance. When all its parts are merely lying in the clockmaker’s drawer, there is no clock. When all its parts have been assembled by the clockmaker, there is a clock. But what about the times when it is partly assembled, with some pieces still lying in the drawer and others already assembled? Is there a clock? How many of its parts have to be assembled in order for it to be true that there is a clock? Traditions do not, it seems, present any unique problems about the timing of their coming into being.

The question that occupied Gallie is a diachronic one about the numerical identity of a tradition over time. It is that, after all, about which B and C are arguing: which of B or C is to be placed in the same tradition as A? There is no identifiable essence of a tradition that gets carried across all the groups of people that belong or claim to belong to the tradition and that can help decide disputes about membership.

With traditions, unlike what I claimed might be true about true succession and faithfulness, there must be a causal component in addition to the similarity component. Just as Hume constructed persons from bundles of experiences and sensations at a time linked by similarity and causation, this is how traditions get constructed from the beliefs and practices of persons or groups of persons. Consider again groups A at  $t$ , and B at  $t^*$ . Let B be the true successor and faithful to A. Do A and B then constitute a single, tradition over the  $t$ – $t^*$  period? Not necessarily.

It may be, as I have claimed, that an argument can be made for the view that a high degree of qualitative similarity of later to earlier is sufficient for true succession. No such argument is plausible in the case of traditions, and on this point I am in agreement with Bevir (2002, 205). A causal requirement is also a necessary condition for a continuing tradition. The latter person or group B who truly succeeds an earlier person or group A within a single tradition does not hold the beliefs or engage in the practices it does, such that the beliefs and practices are only similar to the earlier ones as a matter of coincidence or happenstance. They do what they do or believe what they do in part because that is what the earlier person or group did or believed. The “because” in this is a causal idea. In the example I used before, I claimed that the contemporary anarchists might be the true successor to the ancient Chinese Buddhists or American Indians simply by having the same beliefs and practices as their temporal predecessors. But I would not say that they constitute a single tradition. Something more needs to bind them together beyond mere similarity of beliefs and practices.

The causal condition is what further binds them. But “causal condition” can cover a multitude of different specific connections. The beliefs and practices might be passed down from parent to child, learned by emulation, imitation, explicit teaching or whatever. Or, there might only be a text shared by the earlier and the latter groups. Or, in some cases, physical inheritance might be the kind of causal bond that is required, perhaps in the case of groups like Jews or the Romany. The idea of a causal condition that connects groups holding similar beliefs and engaging in similar practices is an idea that needs much development but I will not further elucidate that idea here and will rely on some sort of intuitive grasp of what it might include.

The causal relation between earlier and later that we are attempting to describe is not the idea of being a full cause. It is the idea of influencing or being a part of the cause. The idea of part cause or influencing is, like similarity, an idea that comes in degrees. For example, one thing can causally influence a second thing more than a third thing influences that second thing; in this way, the idea of causally influencing or part-causing will introduce many complications into the application of this causal condition on traditions. Did for example Greek philosophy or the Hebraic tradition provide the stronger influence on Hellenistic Judaism?

On the other hand, the causal condition, although necessary, is not sufficient for traditions. Similarity is also necessary. Children often do or believe exactly the opposite of what their parents believe or do as a matter of deliberate rejection. They do or believe what they do because their parents did or believed something else. If the causal condition were held to be sufficient by itself, one could not distinguish between faithfulness and rejection of a tradition. In what follows, the discussion focuses mainly on the similarity condition for traditions, it being understood that the causal condition holds.

If a tradition exists at  $t$  and at  $t^*$ , does it need to have existed at every time between  $t$  and  $t^*$ ? Could traditions have a gappy existence? This is not just a “speculative” question. Older traditions can be revived. The best way in which to understand the idea of the revival of a tradition is through gappy existence. The tradition existed up to some point  $t$ , ceased to exist, and then began to exist again at some later time  $t^*$ , where  $t$  and  $t^*$  are not adjacent times. In the gap between  $t$  and  $t^*$ , there are no people who had the relevant beliefs or practices. If there are no people practising or believing, then there is no tradition defined by those beliefs and practices. The revitalisation occurs often by using a text or document in which the former beliefs or practises are recorded (there are other ways in which to revive a “dead” tradition as well) and so available to be “resurrected”. The causal connection between earlier and later groups in such a case is indirect, via a text.

Gappy existence gives rise to the possibility of the following kind of dispute: the Protestants and the Catholics at the time of the Reformation disputed who is the true successor to the Christianity of the New Testament. Protestants might agree that the Catholics of their time were continuous with Christianity of the mediaeval period but might claim that they, and not the Catholics, are the true successors of the Early Church, a tradition which was lost and which they were

resurrecting after centuries of neglect. These are “throwback” claims of traditional continuity. Another example is the way in which classical, nineteenth century Reform Judaism claimed to be the true successors to Prophetic rather than Rabbinic Judaism.

### Disputes

Let us say, then, that a group or person is a true successor of, or faithful to, an earlier group or person if the former has beliefs and practices that are very qualitatively similar to the latter. As we have seen, qualitative similarity comes in degrees, in more-or-less. A’s beliefs may be more like B’s than are C’s, but A’s practices more like C’s than B’s, but overall, taking into account both beliefs and practices, B and C may then be about equally qualitatively similar to A. Again, think of this simplistically for a start. Suppose one could count the beliefs and practices of an individual or a group, at least in some rough and ready way. So the more beliefs and practices two persons or groups had in common, the more similar their beliefs and practices would be and the clearer would be the case for arguing that the latter was the true successor of and highly faithful to the former.

Since two later groups can be, on balance, equally similar to an earlier group in these respects, there can be tie scores. Hence, it is more accurate to speak of “a group or person which or who is a true successor or faithful”, not “the group or person which or who is the successor or faithful”. Or put it this way: neither B nor C might be more faithful or more truly the successor of or faithful to A’s practices and beliefs than the other. B’s and C’s beliefs and practices might be equally qualitatively similar to A’s, although different from one another’s.

From this point of view, often it will simply be a fact that a thinker or a group has no unique true successor, even if they or it has many of them. If the standard to be employed is degree of overall qualitative similarity of beliefs and practices, then there are many plausible examples of this: both the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches were equally true successors to the early Church. Each interpreted a phrase about the relationship of the Godhead and Jesus differently, and subsequently evolved different practices (celibacy or not for the priesthood being an obvious example). They are both and equally true successors to the early Church, equally faithful in different ways to that earlier complex tradition.

Alas, given the way the world is, the logical point is unlikely to deflate the fighting, but that really is what the example is an example of: two later groups, both of which are, perhaps equally or almost equally, similar or faithful to the beliefs and practices of A, yet dissimilar from one another in crucial ways, even if neither of the successor groups is able to acknowledge this fact. Looked at in this way, wherein might such disputes lie? Why might such disputes remain contestable? Why can not one just count the beliefs and practices of the earlier and later groups and determine which of the latter ones has beliefs and practices more similar to the earlier and hence which is more faithful to the earlier, its true successor? And if they are equally similar, then they are equally faithful and equally a true

successor. Should not that end the dispute, at least if the disputants were behaving rationally?

But all this is too simplistic. The idea of individuating and counting beliefs and practices of an individual—and moreover finding a similar total number of beliefs and practices in both persons and groups—is highly artificial. Further, not all beliefs and practices carry the same weight. Some beliefs are more central to a tradition than other beliefs and some practices more central than other practices. But if two persons or two groups do not agree about the relative importance of various beliefs and practices in weighing and assessing overall similarity, the idea that overall qualitative similarity even of centrally important beliefs and practices could work for settling questions of faithfulness and true succession fails. No disputes are likely to be settled by the use of degree of qualitative similarity of centrally important beliefs and practices. The Divine Origin of the Pentateuch is a centrally important belief for Orthodox Jews; for non-Orthodox Jews, it is not centrally important at all.

Traditions include an earlier person or group and the latter, possibly multiple, persons or groups that are true successors of or faithful to that earlier group or exemplar (plus the causal requirement). Traditions can embrace two or more later groups that differ in this way. However, the interesting cases are NOT those in which two later rival groups have (approximately) equally similar centrally important beliefs and practices to the exemplar, although different from one another. The more theoretically interesting cases are ones in which there is an asymmetry: B's beliefs and practices overall are very similar to the exemplar A's, and much more similar to the exemplar A's than are C's. C's beliefs and practices show a mix of similarity but also striking dissimilarity to A's. But does C at  $t^*$  still belong in the same tradition as A at  $t$  and B at  $t^*$  do? C claims that it does; B wishes to deny C's claim to co-membership of the same tradition to which it belongs. B says that members of C are mere heretics, or whatever. This is the likely structure of many of the most intractable disputes about membership of a tradition. Can the Ismaili's really be placed within Islam? Are the contemporary Karaites really Jews? Is National Socialism really any form of socialism?

It is doubtful whether anything useful can be said in a general way about just how qualitatively similar the beliefs and practices of the persons or groups B and C must be, either to each other's or to A's, in order to count as sufficiently similar to conclude that the persons or groups A, B and C all belong to the same tradition. Each tradition may set the limits of permissible variation for itself, so that the criteria for membership become internal. Moreover, these criteria may not be agreed between the two groups, each of which claims to belong to the same tradition. Each tradition may not speak with a single voice about the limits of permissible variation. Finally, the criteria are themselves susceptible to change over time, since the criteria are themselves really only further beliefs of the groups.

In addition to disputes about degree of similarity, there will be disputes about membership of a tradition based on degree of causal influence. Recall that the causal relation of relevance in this is the relation of part cause. The simple picture

introduced by Gallie will need to become more complicated. Let A and A\* be two groups at  $t$  and let B and C be two groups at  $t^*$ . Then let A influence B somewhat and C somewhat, and let A\* influence B somewhat and C somewhat. As causal lines begin to crisscross, further ample opportunity will arise for dispute about where exactly tradition membership lines are to be drawn. To paraphrase from above: it is doubtful whether anything useful can be said in a general way about just how much causal influence must be exerted on B and C by A, in order to count as sufficient to conclude that the persons or groups A, B and C all belong to the same tradition.

If there is any vagueness (and not ambiguity) in these social disputes about membership of a tradition, the vagueness arises in the first instance from the general idea of membership of a tradition. It is the vagueness of that idea, arising from vagueness in the degree of similarity and of causal influence required, that lies behind many of the endless social, religious and political disputes about membership of a tradition or true succession. To that extent, there is a consequent vagueness in the idea of specific traditions too, such as Islam or socialism or Christianity, and so on, because it is essentially contestable which groups or people belong to any specific tradition.

## Notes

- [1] Jeremy Waldron has identified almost 45 concepts that have been alleged to be essentially contested. See: Waldron (2002, see especially 149).
- [2] Compare Hart (1994, 117). In an extreme case, only the officials need to know and accept the so-called rule of recognition for a legal system.
- [3] I am assuming that one can make reasonable judgments about overall similarity between the different beliefs and practices of different groups or individuals. Such judgments may be tricky but presumably no more problematic, and perhaps a good deal less so, than David Lewis' idea of overall similarity between possible worlds. No counterfactual intuitions will be required. See Lewis (1973, 91–5).
- [4] “Hegelian” in the teleological sense that what a thing becomes is the fully adequate standard by which its earlier stages are judged and towards which those earlier stages develop.
- [5] As in Reid's argument against Locke, in which an elderly general can remember what he as the gallant hero did, and he when he was the gallant hero could remember himself as the little boy stealing the apples in the orchard, but the elderly general can no longer remember what he did when he was a little boy.
- [6] There is little analytic philosophical discussion of tradition. See Popper (1949), Acton (1952), Armstrong (1981), and Bevir (2000, 2002). I am of course aware of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre but I do not find his writing helpful for the type of project on which I am engaged.
- [7] I have discussed the issue of methodological individualism and holism at some length in my (1985), *The Metaphysics of the Social World*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

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