“Canonise”, “Canonised”, “Canonisation” etc.: 
Some Remarks on Terminology

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The following short essay offers some critical considerations regarding the terminology used in canon theory and empirical canon research. It is indicated that when employing expressions like ‘canonise’ or ‘canonisation’, certain logical and ontological commitments are implied, yet rarely explicitly considered.

§0 – With the following considerations, I would like to suggest that we should be, for practical and epistemological reasons, aware of the terminology we use, and pay closer attention to semantics, that is, to the ontological commitments and logical implications of the concepts and terms we employ, the language we use when establishing, describing, analysing or explaining certain phenomena.

When it comes to empirical claims about canon, canonising, canonisation, practices of canonisation, etc.,2 conceptual clarification is a necessary condition, not only for a critical examination but also, more importantly, for an understanding of such claims. Before asking sceptically ‘Is that a true claim?’ and before agreeing or disagreeing, we need to ask: ‘What exactly do you mean by that claim?’ If we do not clearly understand a claim, we do not know what facts we need to examine in order to verify or falsify it. Maxwell Bennett and Peter Hacker aptly describe the problem, albeit in another context:3

[W]hen empirical problems are addressed without adequate conceptual clarity, misconceived questions are bound to be raised, and misdirected

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1 I owe special thanks to Annika Rockenberger (Oslo, Norway) whose article on “Textual Scholarship and Canon Formation” (this volume) initiated the considerations gathered in the following essay. For some helpful remarks concerning English verbalisations I would like to thank Alice Gibson (Brighton, UK). All quotations taken from non-English publications are translated by me.

2 As a side note, there is a handbook of current research to be published in 2013 that will include systematic contributions to canon theory and empirical canon research: Handbuch Kanon und Wertung. Ed. by Gabriele Rippl and Simone Winko. Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler 2013. I kindly invite my readers to do a vigilant, critical examination of the terminology used in relevant chapters of that handbook, ensuing from the considerations put forward below.

research is likely to ensue. For any unclarity regarding the relevant concepts will be reflected in corresponding unclarity in the questions, and hence in the design of experiments intended to answer them.

§1 – To begin with, the interrogative ‘why?’ is ambiguous when applied to canonisation and canon formation, and can easily lead to severe categorial confusion. Whilst questions like ‘Why should we incorporate exactly these works in exactly this order into the canon?’ or ‘Why should one know exactly these works and value them highly?’ are to be answered by giving a reason for certain types of action (viz. the selection and compilation of objects or the establishment of corresponding norms of action), questions like ‘Why does exactly this work have the relational property of canonicity?’ or ‘Why are exactly these works part of the canon?’ aim at an explanation of the canonicity of single works or their compilation into a canon.4

What is being justified are actions5 (such as verbal valuations or acts of selection, for example) that aim at the realisation of specific wants or interests of persons or groups of persons. What is being explained are states, events and causal processes. Within such processes, however, justified actions can be causally efficacious factors and thereby be part of (multi-)causal explanations. This holds particularly true for social phenomena, which have emerged from and are persistent due to the actions of historical as well as current actors. Some, or all, actions may be aimed at the canonisation of single works or their compilation into a canon. However, the question remains whether these

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4 Another difference lies in the fact that justificatory questions concerning actions correspond to practical rationality (‘What should we do?’) whilst explanatory questions correspond to theoretical rationality (‘What can we know?’).

5 Here, I do not explicitly account for the possible differentiation between ‘justifying’ as giving reasons for and ‘justifying’ as warranting an action. Whereas providing reasons for an action means to put forward certain considerations that may count in favour for it, warranting an action shows that it does not collide with, or, transgress any norm of action: it is an attempt at showing that an action is unobjectionable. So, warranting an action is an act of defence: one vindicates oneself against a suspicion or accusation of infringement. – I also exclude the question of explaining actions here – especially that of the causal interpretation of reasons; for some highly insightful considerations see Alfred Mele: Action. In: The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy. Ed. by Frank Jackson and Michael Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007. pp. 334–357, see also P.M.S. Hacker: Human Nature: The Categorial Framework. Oxford: Blackwell 2007. Ch. 7 and G.F. Schueler: Reasons and Purposes: Human Rationality and the Teleological Explanation of Action [2003]. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008. Here, I consider of importance primarily the difference between (a) the justification/explanation of an action and (b) the explanation of a process as a causal effect of actions.