

Making Sense of 'Family Resemblance'

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Are Wittgenstein's remarks on “family resemblance” in his later writings intended to present a theory of meaning, and if so, is his theory anti-essentialist (essentialism being the view that to be of a particular kind, a thing must possess certain properties of that kind)? Wittgenstein brings up family resemblance in *The Blue Book* (1958: 17). In commenting on “our craving for generality” he states that we have “the tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term. We are inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term 'game' to the various games; *whereas* games form a family, the members of which have family likenesses. Some of them have the same nose, others the same eyebrows, and others again the same way of walking; and these likenesses overlap.” (my italics).

In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953: I,65) Wittgenstein replies to the charge that he has ignored what is common to all instances of 'language'. “And this is true”, he answers, “*Instead* of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language'” (my italics).

Some commentators have suggested that in these and similar remarks, Wittgenstein is putting forward an anti-essentialist 'family resemblance' theory of meaning, whereby something is an x because it shares some (of an open-ended set of) properties with other instances of 'x', though not necessarily with every x. The following series is one possible illustration of this theory (Note that Item_1 shares no common properties with Item_5):

Item_1: A B C D

Item_2: B C D E

Item_3: C D E F

Item_4: D E F G

Item_5: E F G H

This anti-essentialist 'family resemblance theory' runs into the problem of 'wide-open texture': If the set of relevant properties is open-ended, then how does family resemblance help us to pick out an x, or even learn what an x is? On the other hand, if the set of relevant properties is closed (even if not all the properties need to be instantiated in every x), then are we not back to essentialism?

In this paper, I suggest that Wittgenstein's remarks on family resemblance leaves one form of essentialism entirely unscathed. Wittgenstein's arguments hinge on our apparent inability to *consciously* identify or describe necessary and sufficient properties common to all instantiations of a particular concept such as 'game'. In the *Investigations*, he argues “Don't say: “There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'” - but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. -- For if you *look* at them you will not *see* something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think,

but *look!*” (1953: I,66, my italics). His central 'look and see' argument fails to address the possibility that the commonalities referred to may only be discernable *subconsciously*. The 'look and see' objection is simply irrelevant to those essentialist arguments that appeal to the demonstrated ability of the subconscious mind to grasp subtle and complex distinctions which escape conscious attention.

In Wittgenstein's remarks on family resemblance, the expression “something in common” refers to criteria that are abstracted for the purpose of being described, such that the abstracted criteria or their descriptions become the “justification for applying the general term” or are thought to “makes us use the same word for all”. Wittgenstein argues that in privileging the abstracted criteria or their descriptions over our intuitive judgement as to the correct or incorrect use of an expression, we are putting the cart before the horse. We can, of course, describe some of the conditions for the correct use of 'x', and even give precise definitions for technical terms such as 'hypotenuse'. But definitions are not how we typically learn the meanings of words (and what about the words in the definition, and so on *ad infinitum?*); all these explications of meanings are parasitical on our intuitive grasp of the correct use of an expression.

From the reasonable observation above, Wittgenstein makes an unwarranted leap to the conclusion that we do not grasp essential properties in grasping the meaning of a word. He fails to consider the possibility that where we *consciously* perceive an apparently open-ended set of family resemblances, our *subconscious* mind discerns a closed set of properties identifying an x, y or z. It may be the case that we have an innate ability to *intuit* 'ineffable essences' among the myriad similarities, differences and relations between things as we learn our first language. When we try to consciously identify these necessary and sufficient properties, we often fail outright and our 'successes' are only superficial. Numerous psychological experiments have shown that the human brain processes a staggering amount of information at a bewildering speed, but only a minute fraction of this information is captured by the conscious mind. The great bulk of mental information-processing takes place at the subconscious level, and it is postulated that in some autistic savants a little of this activity spills into the conscious mind in the form of 'uncanny' abilities of photographic memory or mental calculation. So it would be hardly surprising if our subconscious ability to grasp and apply meanings far outstrips our conscious ability to explain or even perceive how we do it.

Author Note: Your comments are most welcome at <http://www.contactify.com/417da>

About the Author: Ben is the editor of *Ordinary Language Philosophy on the WWW* (www.biggerliving.com), a leading Internet resource on the 'Ordinary Language', 'Linguistic' or 'Oxford' School of philosophy, practiced by Gilbert Ryle, J. L. Austin and 'Later' Wittgenstein among others. Ordinary Language Philosophy (OLP) was a leading Anglo-American school of philosophy from 1930 to 1970, but was pronounced 'dead' in the late 60s. The website aims to revive interest in OLP, by facilitating research and discussion on its principles, objectives, scope and significance. *OLP on the WWW* is featured in *Les Signets de la Bibliothèque nationale de France* at http://signets.bnf.fr/html/categories/c_109philo_eng.html. Ben is also a writer and researcher in Media and Communications, and his work has been published in the *Journal of Publishing*, *Publishing Research Quarterly* and *The Philosopher* (Journal of the Philosophical Society of England).