

# Similitudo – Wittgenstein and the Beauty of Connection

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E.M. Forster once gave a motto to his famous novel *Howards End*: Only connect. What meant the numerous connections and intertwinings of different spheres of life in different times here is also relevant for the philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Connections can be made in different ways. They may show inconsistencies in thinking or differences to other peoples' lifestyles. Sometimes the result of trying to connect the different shows an underlying unity or a sameness one did not recognize before.

Wittgenstein, too, tried to connect the different in his writings – even by „teaching differences“ – and he connected them in a very successful and convincing way. „Connection“ has to do with making comparisons before you connect. These comparisons show, if the things compared share qualities or differ in their most important constitutional elements. I would like to suggest a reference here, which belongs to the tradition of making comparisons in order to connect things not being connected before: similitudo.

## 1. A Renaissance Category of Thought

In his book *Les Mots et les Choses* Foucault demonstrates how a fruitful category that stems from the long time past, the Renaissance, is still valid today. Similitudo is the key concept of what people thought in that former time, how they organized the knowledge that was to gain in ordinary life, how – in short – they looked at the world.

I would like to use the similitudo category as a means for helping to talk about Wittgenstein's later philosophy. As Cavell put it, this later philosophy, any philosophy, „like art, is and should be, powerless to *prove* its relevance...“ (Cavell 1976, 96) Bringing in normativity here means – against Cavell's own intentions in this quotation – reminding us of the others, who are able to sanction our behaviour when expressing thoughts. This sheds light on how we depend on our categories, seeing them not as fate, but constructions. I do not want to follow this direction too much (if something is a construction or not). But keeping in mind that *ego* needs *alter* in a process of communication reminds us of the inevitable consequences one has to face not agreeing with common practices: Being secluded from what you know or think to know. The implicit aim of famous categories is to secure synchronicity in connecting things, synchronicity in experiencing daily life in a way comparable to others. It is not surprising, then, that the Renaissance category of similitudo has been successful in shaping our contemporary thought at an unconscious level – we see similarities in common landscapes and common feelings of our peers, the blue sky and the things happening below. Similitudo is not bound to Renaissance times specifically, it is a universal tool to understand what is not clear at first sight, what needs explanation in the form of human practices. To give an example: If I live in a time where God appears absent and the secular presents itself as the individual, I cling to this individualistic stance to save my actions from the pain of being wrong in the eyes of others. Where the eyes of God are gone. The end of the geocentric system, and the theocentric system, too, marks

such a situation of Copernican uncertainty. The Renaissance man looked at the sky not to find transcendent consolation, but emptiness to be filled up with strong notions of a new self.

Foucault's description of similitudo reads as following: „Jusqu' à la fin du xvi siècle, la ressemblance a joué un rôle bâtisseur dans le savoir de la culture occidentale. C'est elle qui a conduit pour un grande part l'exégèse et l'interprétation des textes: c'est elle qui a organisé le jeu des symboles, permis la connaissance de choses visibles et invisibles, guidé l'art de les représenter. Le monde s'enroulait sur lui-même: la terre répétant le ciel, les visages se mirant dans les étoiles, et l'herbe enveloppant dans ses tiges les secrets qui servaient à l'homme.“ (Foucault 1966, 32)

The identification of similitudo appears as a process of applying the concept of a mirror. Not argumentation, but resemblance, mirroring, constitutes a realm of meaningful explanations, explanations which are meaningful, because of their applicability to what people perceive as being the truth. Truth is not only adaequatio, stating conditions for *x* being truthful in situation *y* (let alone truth conditions in Tarski's sense). Truth is rather a description that fits where there has not been an epistemological gap before. Understanding ideas like similitudo as ideas describing our lives enriches these lives for a certain time, the time of discussion, in which „our lives“ play the role of substances being organized by an abstract principle. Similitudo is furthermore a form of an explanatory description coining practices of language use as play. The „jeu des symboles“ Foucault has in mind transforms the seriousness of a scientific notion (similitudo) to a situation of trying to catch some sense, getting rid of a hidden law that separates self and play in scientific discourse. Wittgenstein can serve as a witness to the test of bringing in playful elements, introducing a strong inclination to see language as game, as test, as rehearsal. This is a thought connected with Foucault's emphasizing the world as a place that mirrors itself in itself. „La terre répétant le ciel“. Self-repetition of the world (or the earth repeating the sky) leads to philosophically interesting circumstances: The unity of world pictures consists in the possibility to connect the elements constituting world views in a reliable way. Consistent world-views do not leave the inherited room of signs and symbols, they redefine them in a quiet, common way – the principle of mirroring repeats the construction of human eyes watching things. All in all, we possess a kind of ontogenetic inheritance we can find in phylogenetic discourse – our organic endowment is speaking when people are using and looking for principles explaining the complexity of human life in the simplicity of what entails its own understanding, because seeing (in the case of similitudo) is something we already do and cannot fail to do.

## 2. Likeness, not Sameness as the Guiding Principle of Language Use

Likeness, resemblance, not sameness is the principle language is based on. Sameness – as a principle structuring the world – would indicate a constant need for identity, being identified as being the same by others. Identity is, so

to speak, a category somewhat overestimated. One must live in the diversity of things, in the diversity of forms of life in which the occurrence and recurrence of common language games is likely to take place. „Common“ means: shared by others and the fact of sharing conditions of daily life with others can be comforting when confronted with deep differences inherited, as it were, from „the elders“.

The language game reassures someone uttering sentences (the pragmatic dimension!) to be part of a much larger occasion – the combination of talking, feeling, thinking as a constant anthropological basis of human communication. The relation of a language game and its form of life – the form of life in which it occurs – is contingent and reliable at the same time. Reliability stems from the fact that a form of life is framing language games so calmly. (I cannot avoid the singular here, but I tend to disagree with Garver, agreeing with Haller) Contingency is not only the frightening modern disease Wittgenstein called the „darkness of this time“ /of our time, but a field to be explored without too many limitations. Something may happen, if something else happens. Language is shared by many. It seems to be a gentle illusion to believe in intersubjectivity as Habermas does – language use is far more difficult, contaminated with aspirations of power and hate, place of vivid self-descriptions often unknown to the people uttering them. In short, language is the place where descriptions cross, descriptions of the self, of others, of ideal landscapes, of poetic images of these landscapes. In using language we seem to look for similarity, resemblance, likeness because its identification comforts the human heart. This is not a kitschy overdose of romanticism, but stating a mere fact. Wittgenstein's hypotheses in the *Philosophical Investigations* combine a remarkable understanding of the ethical needs of his readers with an awareness of the necessity to find things (matching other things) as a structure of our use of language.

### 3. Wittgenstein's Grammatical Turn in Considering the Similitudo Principle

Approaching similitudo the grammatical way is, at first glance, not surprising. But there are indeed some changes the category has to face when grammatically addressed: the similarities (between the sky and the world below) no longer have the status of ontologically fixed elements. The components of the comparison sky-life below are shifting – from ontological privilege of the higher spheres to looking at the sky as a criterion of everyday language use. If – to illustrate the grammatical turn pragmatically – the sky is just a dreamy expression of imagination, not confronting me with the rain pouring on my head, the similarities that can be drawn from the sky to my head are limited. Of course there are modal differences of, say, poetic language and pragmatic language, the latter being used with the aim of entailing changes in the day to day life. Understanding similitudo grammatically means excluding such understandings of similitudo that forget about the actual language use – the shortest definition of „grammatical“ is: „explaining how a word is used.“ Thus, approaching similitudo grammatical means to employ this similarity for showing how similar things are used in everyday life, how I speak of the sky when differentiating it from poetic descriptions (as in the *spleen* poems of Charles Baudelaire). The sky mirrors the circumstances below, but it does not define them any longer – and it is precisely this quality of indefiniteness (some say: „uncanny“, thinking of Freud), of things resembling each other where the grammatical point comes in. Grammar: to look at similar things with the intention of connecting them with actual language use. Wittgenstein does so in PI 66 and 67 and following paragraphs. PI

66 contains the famous imperative „Denk nicht sondern schau“/English: „Don't think, but look“. It is striking how strong the topicalization of similarity is bound to language use here. The main intention of this paragraph seems to be bringing the similitudo category „back to the rough ground“ (PI 107). The rough ground can be identified with the things one can perceive while watching language working in actual language games. Watching instead of thinking makes sure not to miss the crossing similarities in utterances meant to play a role in contexts already established. The role-playing quality of utterances ties them up with what others are expecting and, on the other hand, what the speaker may expect. Expectations, to be realistic, need former contexts showing that the fulfilment of an expectation is possible. So the task is, in Wittgenstein's case, not to use similarities for confirming existing world views being right, but showing how similarities lie at the core of processes constituting meaningful sentences and utterances.

When Wittgenstein talks about games in PI 66, he applies a concept of family resemblances described in the following paragraph. Olympic games are no card games, ball games do not match the game „patience“. The notion of family resemblance sums up a number of singular thoughts – it is, so to say, the non-essentialist essence of a theoretical step from stressing a onesided nature of „the“ game to stressing the shifting boundaries of different games meeting in the criterion of being governed by implicit and explicit rules. Someone who desires to know what a game is, shall look at *games*. The development from one to many contains a whole change of theoretical orientation: It is not only the adieu to words like substance, essence, *Wesen*, but also the fulfilment of a program, which contains a new vision of how philosophy is based on the similarity concept. The intention is (to use this contaminated word) to find „a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.“ (PI 66) Not the number of similarities to be found plays a decisive role here. It is the application of a concept well-known in former times. Wittgenstein reintroduces it – without tracing its origin back to his philosophical ancestors. Two effects of this prominent reference are: Firstly, the redefinition of the similitudo concept (some may prefer „description“ instead of „definition“ thinking of PI 109) reminds the reader of the great chain of being which connects thinking of the past and thinking of the present. An utopian approach to the question of meaning is only possible, because former times such as the Renaissance laid the basis for our linguistic escape from old models of meaning like the Augustinian picture of language pointed out in PI 1. Secondly, the similitudo category is rather used as a question than as an answer in this paper. This question functions as a defence of the need of such philosophical thoughts which are like „indistinct photographs“ (PI 71). Praising the indistinct is praising the possibility of connecting; there is finally an ethical point in making connections insofar as connections embody a strong belief that the different can be useful without being degraded to blunt identity. In other words, the possibility to connect the unknown until a state of knowing is not beyond reach anymore secures ordinary lives with ordinary language use – not only with the use of ordinary language. Especially in Foucault's words quoted above the emphasis is on a capacity of imagination. Poetic language (language used in poetry) is usually aware of the beauty of connection. Beauty is the possibility to alter a given state of affairs to a better one. Better in the sense of advanced aesthetics, better in the sense of ethical refinement. The philosophical notion of similitudo (Foucault) and similarity (Wittgenstein) is part of a larger movement to-

ward imagination even in non-poetical circumstances. The simplified version of the Renaissance era that I presented by quoting Foucault's French words is that renaissance people took their material and mental world seriously. They did not care to sound exaggerating, while relying on things like the sky you cannot define. This is their ethical advance, because life resists to definitions and tends to go on silently. In the end, grammar serves as a reminder of our ethical duties – without neglecting singularities of expressions in the field of aesthetics, of which Wittgenstein was well aware of.

#### 4. Forster and the Rainbow Bridge

Wittgenstein probably believed in the necessity of founding philosophical thinking in everyday life as well as saving the world of imagination from anti-individualistic, cheap esteem, like Wittgenstein criticizing the cliché of English literature professors constantly praising Shakespeare. Artistic expression has to abstain from mediocrity and stubborn principles, never daring to face true change. Literary expression sometimes meets this requirement of true vision without an all too fashionable vocabulary. E.M. Forster speaking of the rainbow bridge in his novel *Howards End* returns to Foucault mentioning the sky as an object of reference for making comparisons and drawing connections. The paragraph, which illuminates the motto „Only connect“ appears in the beginning of chapter 22. I would like to quote the passage here to illustrate the wider aspects of human behaviour that Forster takes into account – as well as Wittgenstein: (Margaret about her fiancé) „Mature as he was, she might yet be able to help him to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man. With it love is born, and alights on the highest curve, glowing against the grey, sober against the fire. (...) Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die.“ (Forster 2007, 201-203)

Grammatical investigations in Wittgenstein's sense (not easy to grasp in its full meaning) refer to us living in/as fragments not as an infelicity, but as a normal state of affairs. Prose and passion merge and similarities are the way to describe the language dome constituted by the two. Connections signify things that would have a different meaning without linguistic brothers. Grammar and imagination are siblings of the distant kind; similitudo is the key notion, when Forster puts Foucault's central passage about the philosophically promising sky in the perspective of interaction practice, representing an old dream of wholeness and semantic peace: (Margaret is speaking) „Nor was the message difficult to give. It need not take the form of a good ‚talking‘. By quiet indications the bridge would be built and span their lives with beauty.“ (Forster 2007, 202-203)

#### Literature

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