

ARTICLE SECTION

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Wittgenstein and Family Concepts

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the three interpretations of sections 65-67 in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, where he answers the question "do we call different things by the same word because of a common feature?" Interpretation A holds that we call different things by the same word because of overlapping similarities between them; Interpretation B adopts a socio-historical reading, where concepts evolved and extended historically on the basis of some similarities; and interpretation C includes aspects of the first two interpretations, but sees similarities as just one of several kinds of relations and affinities between concepts which explain why we call different things by the same word. Through an investigation of Wittgenstein's answer and the objections made to interpretation A, I argue that interpretation C, although not prominent in the secondary literature, provides better answers to the objections raised.

Introduction

I distinguish between three different interpretations of Wittgenstein's remarks in *Philosophical Investigations* (PI) 65-67. There Wittgenstein proposes that, for some concepts, there need not be one defining common feature, which justifies our calling different things by the same word. The prevailing interpretation, interpretation A, takes Wittgenstein to be saying that we call different things by the same word because there exist overlapping similarities between them, and not because of the presence of a common feature. The former are termed 'family resemblance' concepts. Interpretation B differs from interpretation A as it adopts a socio-historical reading and holds that concepts have evolved and

extended historically on the basis of some similarities. Lastly, interpretation C, to which I adhere, takes Wittgenstein to say that there are different kinds of relations and affinities which justify the use of the same word for different things; similarities are just one kind of these relations. Interpretation C is therefore not inconsistent with A and B, but goes further, regarding ‘family resemblance concepts’ as just one kind of ‘family concepts’. I will argue that the notion of similarities receives undue attention in the relevant secondary literature, and that this somewhat narrow approach can be misleading. As I will show in the following, close attention to Wittgenstein’s text reveals that this focus on similarities is not justified. In section 1 I will examine PI 65-67 in detail. In section 2 I explain the prevailing interpretation A and the main objections raised against it. In section 3 I move to interpretation B, which attempts to meet some objections to interpretation A. I will argue that interpretation B to some extent fails in this ambition. In section 4, I introduce interpretation C. This interpretation includes aspects of the first two interpretations, and, although it is not prominent in the secondary literature, it provides, in my view, better answers to some of the objections raised to interpretation A. I will also argue that it is closest to Wittgenstein’s text. In section 5, I discuss in more detail one of the most prominent unanswered objections to PI 65-67, which interpretation C cannot meet by itself. Finally, in section 6, I draw some conclusions.

1. PI 65-67

In PI 65-67, Wittgenstein gives three examples, suggesting in each case that there is no one defining common feature that determines usage. The first example is ‘language’. In PI 65, Wittgenstein faces ‘the great question’. He writes:

Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations. – For someone might object against me: “You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language games, but have nowhere said ... what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language.”

Since Wittgenstein doesn’t give a definition of a language-game, a topic he was discussing in the previous passages, his interlocutor

objects and demands one, a definition in terms of a common feature which defines the concept discussed. The great question is: what is common to all these activities we call language?

Wittgenstein's answer is straightforward,

[I]nstead 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”.

According to Wittgenstein then, there is no one common feature in virtue of which we call different things by the same word ‘language’, but, instead, the use of the term is governed by the existence (or otherwise) of different kinds of relations, and it is these that determine whether we call particular phenomena ‘language’.

The second example is ‘games’, and is discussed in *PI* 66.

Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games”. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic Games, and so on. What is common to them all? – 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.

If you look and see, you won't find one common feature, but you find overlapping features between the different activities we call games, features such as losing, winning, entertainment, patience, skill, luck, etc., none of which is present in every game. ‘And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.’ In *PI* 67-a, Wittgenstein calls these overlapping similarities ‘family resemblances’.

I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.

Thus, there need not be one common feature between all the members of the family, and it is not even necessary that there should be an overall similarity between all members of the family (although there may be on occasion). It will be sufficient for there to be different local overlapping similarities between members of the family, as is the case in games.

The third example, ‘number’ is given in *PI* 67-b:

the kinds of number form a family in the same way. Why do we call something a “number”? Well, perhaps because it has a – direct – relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.

The analogy of fibres within a thread is a good one, and brings out very clearly the distinction between global and local similarity made in the previous paragraph. The lack of dependence on a single common feature (the single fibre that runs the length of the thread) in determining membership or otherwise of the family of uses emphasizes, instead, the binding strength of the local relationships between uses (the individual, shorter fibres) which, taken together, constitute the overall family (the whole thread).

In *PI* 67-c, however, Wittgenstein discusses a potential objection. The objection is that we might say, after all, “there is something common to all these constructions – namely the disjunction of all their common properties”. According to Wittgenstein, though, this is a triviality, a mere “playing with words. One might just as well say: “Something runs through the whole thread – namely the continuous overlapping of those fibres.” The point, again, is that there is no one fibre that runs its length, and the same is true for some words, where there is no one common feature in virtue of which we call different things by the same word. Instead, it is in virtue of the different local relations between the cases that we do so.

Wittgenstein’s answer to the question ‘do we call different things by the same word because of a common feature?’ is

therefore negative. However, it is important not to read this position as claiming that no concepts are common feature concepts. Rather, the three cases in point should be read as offering significant counterexamples to any claim that every analysis of the usage of the same word on different occasions should be driven by the search for a common feature.

I now turn to the examination of the three different interpretations of these passages.

2. Interpretation A

The prevailing interpretation, interpretation A, takes Wittgenstein to be saying that it is because of the overlapping similarities, and not the presence of a common feature, that we call different things by the same word. R. Bambrough is the first to explore this interpretation, with an influential article on ‘family resemblance’. He explains:

We may classify a set of objects by reference to the presence or absence of features ABCDE. It may well happen that five objects edcba are such that each of them has four of these properties and lacks the fifth, and that the missing feature is different in each of the five cases. A simple diagram will illustrate this situation:

e	d	c	b	a
ABCD	ABCE	ABDE	ACDE	BCDE

Here we can already see how natural and how proper it might be to apply the same word to a number of objects between which there is no common feature. (Bambrough 1960: 209-210)

This reading seems very much in line with the account of Wittgenstein’s three examples given above, and shows in a practical example how the presence of local similarities, rather than a common feature that persists across all examples, might be sufficient to provide a rationale for grouping particular activities under the same term. Bambrough takes it that, in addition to ‘games’, other words are treated by Wittgenstein in the same way: ‘reading’, ‘expecting’, ‘proposition’ and ‘number’ are all family resemblance concepts (see Bambrough 1960: 211).

In the same vein, Anthony Kenny writes: “General terms such as ‘game’, ‘language’ ‘proposition’ were applied not on the basis of the recognition of common features, but on the basis of family likeness” (Kenny 2006: 177). Baker and Hacker write, “What makes the various activities called ‘games’ into games is a complicated network of similarities” (Baker and Hacker 1980: 326). And they add “[T]he *investigations* [PI] holds that ‘proposition’, ‘language’ and ‘number’...are family-resemblance concepts...” (Baker and Hacker 2009: 224).

Thus, according to this interpretation, classifying an activity as a game does not require the activity to possess a feature common to all other games. Instead, its membership is validated or otherwise according to its possessing (or not) certain overlapping and criss-crossing similarities with some but not necessarily all of the set of activities dubbed ‘games’. Concepts that determine their extension in this way are called ‘family resemblance concepts’.

However, philosophers raise three main objections to this interpretation.¹ The first objection is that one can always find *some* similarity between different things, and can always point out a resemblance between any two activities. Put in other words, in *some* respect everything resembles everything else. The criterion is therefore vacuous because, strictly speaking, I can justify calling any activity a game on the grounds that it resembles, in one way or another, one of the activities we call games (there are different formulations of this objection in Baker and Hacker (2009), Bellaimy (1990), Mandelbaum (1995) and Prien (2004)).

The second objection that many commentators and interpreters have raised questions the consistency of interpretation A with Wittgenstein’s use of the term ‘family’. They object that the term seems to imply some kind of ‘genetic connection’ between the cases, a criterion different from interpretation A’s focus on

¹ Some of these objections are raised against Wittgenstein himself, and some against interpretation A, offering a different interpretation. In introducing them, I do not distinguish between what is raised against Wittgenstein and what is raised against interpretation A. The points made by objectors are similar and can be grouped in three objections. In answering them below, I explain what I take to be the most plausible interpretation of Wittgenstein.

overlapping similarities. After all, individuals are typically not classified as members of the family on the basis of their similarities to one another. The charge, then, is that interpretation A takes the opposite direction to that which is implied by Wittgenstein's metaphor of 'family' (there are different formulations of this objection in Beardsmore (1995), Gert (1995), Mandelbaum (1995), and Prien (2004)).

The third objection concerns the apparently narrow way in which interpretation A reads *PI* 65-67. The claim is that it would be a mistake to confine our focus in this passage solely to consideration of similarities. Wittgenstein, they claim, clearly has a broader notion of what make us use the same word in different cases, namely that it is because of different kinds of relations and affinities, rather than purely because of similarities which are just one kind of relation or affinity (there are different formulations of this objection in Gert (1995) and Sluga (2006)).

3. Interpretation B

Interpretation B seeks to answer the first objection raised against interpretation A. As with interpretation A, interpretation B holds that, for some concepts, it is the overlapping similarities and not a common feature that justify our calling different things by the same word. However, in order to avoid the objections discussed above, it takes Wittgenstein's remarks about family resemblance as sociological-historical remarks. J. Hunter writes that "in the evolution of language the extension of a concept may have been gradually enlarged" in different directions, and for different kinds of similarities (Hunter 1985: 54). The concept evolved and was extended, and for each new instance there was a similarity with an existing concept which resembled the new phenomenon in at least one feature, and the concept became a family resemblance concept through this historical enlargement. In other words, it is a historical fact that the over-classification dangers envisaged by the objection, that everything resembles everything else in some way, have not come to pass. Concepts, instead, have evidently evolved successfully on the basis of local similarity and this evolution has

not been marked by every new phenomenon or instance being classified under every available concept.

Bernd Prien also prefers interpretation B. He explains that the problem with interpretation A is that it “takes the presence of similarities to be a sufficient condition for an object’s falling under a concept” (Prién 2004: 20). If we understand the simple presence of the similarities as a sufficient condition for subsuming different things under the concept, then the problem is that there are many similarities between the things we call X and the things we don’t call X, and “the extensions of concepts would have to be much wider than they actually are” (Prién 2004: 20). Thus, for example, many things which we don’t call games nevertheless share similarities with the activities we *do* call games, and therefore, according to interpretation A, we ought to call them games, but we do not. Prién therefore thinks, with some justification, that objection 1 is fatal to interpretation A.

However, according to Prién, interpretation B solves the problem by expanding the account of the role that similarities play in determining which objects fall under the concept. Like Hunter, he thinks that the historical facts show that when in the past we have been faced with a new phenomenon and it has been subsumed under a concept, this has occurred because it resembles, in some way or other, other phenomena similarly subsumed under that concept. “Consequently, similarities are only necessary but not sufficient for extending a concept to a new object” (Prién 2004: 20). As a result, “[W]hen an activity exhibits resemblances with games, it does not follow that the concept ‘game’ will be extended to this activity” (Prién 2004: 20). Interpretation B thus does not give up the basis of interpretation A, but it avoids the unrestricted reliance on similarity which made interpretation A vulnerable to objection 1.

It seems to me that there are two problems that interpretation B has to face. The first arises if objection 1 is taken to be a *reductio* on the very idea of similarity governing classification. Thus, if the challenge from the objector is that reliance on criteria of similarity alone will result in all phenomena being classified under all concepts, she is unlikely to be impressed by the historical account

that shows that no such outcome has, in fact, occurred. Her response is likely to be that the absence of such a result confirms her objection that similarity alone cannot be the determining factor.

The problem for interpretation B is that it offers what might be characterized as a *descriptive* rather than an *explanatory* account.² In other words, it describes the outcome that has in fact occurred and presents it as a refutation of objection 1. However, in order to *explain* how this finer-grained discrimination has been possible, supporters of interpretation B surely have to offer some idea of how this might have occurred.

Hunter shows some recognition of the issue. He states that when we face a new phenomenon either there is no problem in subsuming it under one concept, because we have learnt how to use such a concept, or there is a problem, and no appeal to similarities will solve the issue (see Hunter 1985: 55-56). He therefore seems to recognize that some additional factor, in his account 'learning', must be involved, but he doesn't elaborate on what is to be learnt, and therefore his position could hardly be taken to be a knockdown argument against the earlier objections, not least because his 'learning' explanation seems vulnerable to a potential regress in which the basis of the original discrimination (which is then learnt by others) remains mysterious.

As a result, if Hunter and Prien are relying on their account of history to carry the day, significantly more work needs to be done to determine what the additional factor might be, and how it is going to meet objection 1. However, there is no objection to the very notion of historical development. The discussion of the additional factor is addressed in section 5.³

² The key concern is to answer the 'How' question, which will be the focus of section 5. Whether this is badged as 'explanatory' or merely a deeper level of 'description' is not material to my purpose.

³ A supporter of interpretation B might respond by saying that it might be a contingent historical fact that concepts were enlarged in this direction and not that. However, neither Hunter nor Prien explicitly adopts this position. We don't need to deny that this might be the case for some concepts, and this could be incorporated. In addition, when commentators talk of extensions being expanded, it seems that they assume that members of the original extensions share a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, since concepts become family resemblance concepts through historical development. However, neither

Lastly, interpretation B appears to be open to objection 3. Recall objection 3: Wittgenstein has a broader notion of what makes us use the same word in different cases than similarities alone, even if the application of similarities is constrained in some way. For him, our decisions about classification are governed by different kinds of relations and affinities of which similarity is just one kind. By focusing entirely on similarity, constrained or otherwise, proponents of interpretation B (and interpretation A) ignore this wider concern. I will argue that objection 3 is serious and is justified by close attention to the text of *PI* 65-67. As a result, I propose that a further interpretation, interpretation C, is necessary.

4. Interpretation C

According to supporters of interpretation C, Wittgenstein in *PI* 65-67 has a broader notion of what makes us call different things by the same word than similarities. Interpretation C is offered by H. J. Gert and Hans Sluga, each in slightly different ways. In what follows, I explain how this interpretation meets objection 3, and potentially avoids objection 2, if we regard Wittgenstein's use of the term 'family' in a particular way. However, interpretation C does seem to have difficulties with objection 1, and consideration of this issue is taken up later in the next section.

Gert suggests that “[F]amily-making relations aren't necessarily relations of resemblance”, and that there are many relations which make families, resemblances being just one kind (Gert 1995: 180). For example, Gert interprets *PI* 67-b, where Wittgenstein suggests that we have a family of cases which we call 'number' as follows: “It's more natural... to think of numbers as forming a family on the basis of mathematical relations (addition, multiplication, squaring, etc.)” than on the basis of similarities (Gert 1995: 179). She also cites *PI* 65 and 108 where Wittgenstein talks about relations that make families, but doesn't talk about resemblance.

Hunter nor Prien explicitly adopts this position. This assumption need not be endorsed, if we incorporate interpretation B into the wider interpretation, interpretation C, as explained below in footnote 12.

Further support for Gert's position comes from *PI* 164, where Wittgenstein talks about 'family of cases' in the context of 'reading' and 'deriving', and *PI* 77, where he talks about 'family of meanings' in the context of 'good'. In neither passage does Wittgenstein mention similarities, nor does he mention 'family resemblance', referring only to the notion of 'family of cases'. Moreover, even in *PI* 66, Wittgenstein mentions relations in addition to similarities, which might indicate that he is thinking of different kinds of relations, similarities being one of them.

According to Gert, Wittgenstein thinks there are, in fact, many different kinds of relations (including similarities) which make us use the same word in families of cases: whilst similarity is used in one example, 'games' in *PI* 66, the majority of examples do not explicitly rely on similarity or resemblance.

A similar reading is given by Sluga. He distinguishes between two kinds of relations which make us call different things by the same word. The first is the relation of "kinship, of descent, of some sort of real and causal connection...the second is that of similarity, resemblance, affinity, and correspondence" (Sluga 2006: 14). Here, we have two different kinds of terms. Consider some of Sluga's examples: in historical accounts, he claims, kinship concepts are what we look for; we try "to establish direct and real connections, causal links, dependencies and 'influences'" (Sluga 2006: 19). This is the case when we look at concepts in the history of Art or Philosophy, for example. On the other hand, we look for what might broadly be described as similarity concepts when we compare types of philosophical ideas, or when we examine Art styles from different cultures, for example. These do not require the sorts of causal connections necessary in the case of kinship concepts, which, in turn, do not require the presence of similarities. Sluga also recognizes that there are cases where there is overlap between the two kinds of concept.

What both commentators have in common is that they take Wittgenstein's position in the *PI* to be that there are different kinds of relation which make us call different things by the same word, and similarities represent just one kind of these relations. Because interpretation C is not wholly reliant on the notion of similarity or

resemblance, it clearly answers objection 3. My own version of interpretation C differs from Sluga's in that Sluga seems to only focus on two kinds of relations: similarities and causal historical relations. He doesn't mention any other kinds, while Gert suggests many different kinds of relations. I agree with Gert on this point.

On the other hand, I suggest that interpretation C meets objection 2 if we adopt a reading of the term 'family' derived from the work of Baker and Hacker, and thus different from Gert's and Sluga's readings.

Objection 2 is concerned that the term 'family' seems to imply some kind of 'genetic' or causal connection between the cases, which seems to run counter to the claim that Wittgenstein suggests that the concepts are related by overlapping similarities. In other words, the problem is to do with the term 'family', and the issue is whether, in using that term, Wittgenstein implies a causal connection or not.

The text is not conclusive, and Sluga places much of the blame for the confusion at Wittgenstein's door. He suggests that Wittgenstein himself is responsible for the lack of clarity because he fails to maintain rigorously the distinction between family concepts and resemblance concepts in using the crucial, and much focused on, term 'family resemblance'. According to Sluga, Wittgenstein "fails to appreciate the genuine difference between these two ways of speaking, and his characterization of family resemblance combines both in a single formula" (Sluga 2006: 14).⁴ For Sluga, the term 'family' does indeed suggest causal links, and he thinks that Wittgenstein, by using this term 'family', suggests some kind of causal connection. However, concepts determined by notions of similarity or resemblance typically have no need to call on causal connections in determining which phenomena fall under their banner. It is therefore misleading and confusing to use the term 'family resemblance' for these types of concepts because the very idea of combining 'family' and 'resemblance' runs counter to

⁴ Sluga refers to Nietzsche's work which takes family resemblance, as Sluga reads Nietzsche, to be dependent on kinship relations. So the similarities are results of the kinship relations. According to Sluga, Wittgenstein, influenced by Nietzsche, develops the idea in two different directions without realizing it.

their inherent incompatibility. Consequently, Sluga suggests that it is better to stop using the term ‘family resemblance’ altogether.

Gert is also impressed by objection 2. She writes, regarding ‘family resemblance concepts’:

[M]y account holds that they [the resemblances] are a subset of the resemblances which hold between particulars that are, in a sense, *already* members of the same kind or family. Again, members of a human family bear family resemblances to one another because they belong to the same family, they don't belong to the same family because they resemble one another. You resemble your parents because of the way you're related to them, you're not related to them because you resemble them. (Gert 1995: 183)

Gert, then, seems to take the term ‘family’ to imply a ‘genetic’ relation, at least for ‘family resemblances’. There are three problems with this account. First, it seems inconsistent with her initial suggestion about ‘family-making relations’. This expression seems to suggest that it is the relations between members of the family that make them belong to the family; and since ‘resemblances’ are one kind of these relations, the resemblances, and not the genetic connection, makes the members of the family belong to the family. This is inconsistent with the quote above. Second, Gert’s account is open to Sluga’s objection: if the term ‘family’ implies a causal connection, we will confuse ‘family concepts’ with ‘similarity concepts’. Lastly, it is not clear if she holds the same view, that the term ‘family’ implies ‘genetic’ relation, for other kinds of relations. Take, for example, the family of numbers, members of which Gert take to be related to each other by mathematical relations. Do these numbers relate to each other because they belong to the same family already? Or is it because they have these relations they form a family? Once we consider other relations, the pressure of the objection, which is based on the tension over whether things share a resemblance because they belong to the same family or belong to the same family because they resemble one another, seems to fade away. One way to see this is to think of similar words, such as ‘category’ or ‘group’, where the members belong to the same ‘category’ or ‘group’ without any implication of a ‘genetic’ or ‘causal’ relation. It seems to me that

this will lead to a reading that doesn't imply the 'genetic' relation, as I will explain below. As for Gert's reading, since she takes 'family' to imply a causal connection for 'family resemblance', she might hold the same for other relations. Nevertheless, there is no discussion in her paper of what she takes 'family' to imply for other relations.

In summary, both Sluga and Gert take the term 'family' to imply a causal genetic relation. However, there is a different way to meet objection 2 without taking the term to imply any 'genetic' connection, as Baker and Hacker do. This has the benefit of using the generic term 'family concept' for different kinds of relations, as we shall see.

Baker and Hacker have a different perspective on the notion of 'family' and argue that "the *genetic* explanation of resemblances among members of a family is irrelevant" (my italics) (Baker and Hacker 2005: 155). Their view is that the point of the analogy with family resemblances in *PI* 67-a "is to show us that there need be no common properties among the extension of a concept *in virtue of which* we deem them all to fall under the concept", the use of the term 'family' is not intended to make causal or genetic claims (Baker and Hacker 2005: 155). Thus, according to their reading, in using the term 'family resemblance', Wittgenstein doesn't imply that there must be a causal connection, and the basis on which objection 2 was raised is false.

In constructing interpretation C, I prefer to adopt Baker and Hacker's reading of this issue. For me, the text does not support the strong genetic or causal reading of the term 'family'. My version of interpretation C therefore reads *PI* 65-67 as follows. Family concepts are to be contrasted with common feature concepts. For the latter, it is because of the common feature that each possesses that we call different things by the same word. For the former, it is because of different kinds of relations, and not because of a common feature, that we call different things by the same word. Whilst similarity is one valid type of such a qualifying relation, others might be mathematical, historical and so on. Those commentators who read Wittgenstein narrowly, and take overlapping resemblances or similarities *alone* to be the alternative

to the common feature explanation, lack textual justification for their position.⁵ In this, I agree with Sluga and Gert. In addition, the strong reading of the term ‘family’ also lacks textual justification: it doesn’t seem that Wittgenstein’s general purpose was to imply a genetic or causal connection. In this, I disagree with Sluga and Gert. Note that I use the term ‘family concepts’ differently from Sluga: He wants to save the term for concepts that have a causal historical connection. I, on the other hand, use it generically for any kind of relation, specifying a historical genetic connection when appropriate. Moreover, and independent of any interpretive consideration, when we use ‘family’ in this sense, we are not in the grip of the above-mentioned tension between resemblance and family. Once we consider different kinds of relations, and once we adopt a generic term for these relations, we see that it is beneficial to take ‘family’ to mean ‘category’ or ‘group’, as explained above, with no ‘genetic’ implication. I believe that Wittgenstein uses the term in this sense, but the text itself is inconclusive.

All of this, of course, does not deny that the extension of some concepts will be determined by genetic or causal factors, just as Wittgenstein and interpretation C do not deny that some concepts have common features present in each qualifying member. The concern here is, firstly, to demonstrate that concepts are not formed *necessarily* on the basis of common features; secondly, to maintain that similarity or resemblance is too narrow a notion to be the determinant of conceptual discrimination in family cases; and, thirdly, that although some concepts may be determined on the basis of genetic or causal connections, Wittgenstein’s use of the term ‘family’ seems to be orthogonal to this. As a result, concepts that fall under the term ‘family resemblance’ can be seen as a subset of ‘family concepts’, neither implying any necessary genetic or causal connection.

⁵ It seems that one of the reasons which make commentators focus on the similarities is that Wittgenstein’s texts from the 1930’s mention only similarities, especially the influential text *The Blue Book*. It might be that Wittgenstein changed his mind and thinks of different kinds of relations later. However, this would require careful study of the development of his ideas, and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Interpretation A and interpretation B can both now be seen to be too narrow, in their own different ways. Interpretation A's focus on similarities or resemblances is too restrictive and fails to take account of the other types of affinities and relations that Wittgenstein clearly had in mind. Interpretation B is predicated on a strong genetic or causal reading of the term 'family' that proves to be unwarranted when Wittgenstein's wider use of the terms is considered. For Wittgenstein, 'family' is to be applied more widely and generally without the causal implication. This allows interpretation C to meet both objection 2 and objection 3, as we saw earlier. This leaves us with the task of assessing how well interpretation C fares against objection 1.

5. Two Solutions to Objection 1

The essence of objection 1 was that discrimination on the basis of similarity or resemblance was insufficient because it is always possible to find similarities or resemblances between any two things: everything resembles everything else in some way. Consequently, if an activity is called a game because of the similarities it shares with some other activities called games, then, in virtue of everything resembling everything else in some way, it seems impossible to bar membership to any other activity, thereby rendering the term 'game' vacuous.

Proponents of interpretation C should be well aware that those pressing objection 1 may well turn their attention to the wider relations and affinities employed by Wittgenstein according to interpretation C and ask what it is that constrains the application of *these* relations, since the same possibility of over-generation appears likely. For the sake of convenience I will focus on the issue as it applies to similarities, but both potential solutions examined below could apply equally easily to the wider notion of affinities and relations.

In response to objection 1, a number of commentators argue that Wittgenstein was more sophisticated than the objection implies, having in mind only *salient* relevant similarities, rather than similarities *tout court*. Baker and Hacker, for instance, argue in this way: "Wittgenstein implies that the similarities among games justify

calling them “games”, and that the absence of relevant similarities justifies refusing to call an activity ‘a game’” (Baker and Hacker 2009: 215). In practice, they argue, “we do not accept any arbitrary resemblances as warranting the extension of the term” (Baker and Hacker 2009: 220). Gert reads Wittgenstein along similar lines: “[F]amily resemblances are those salient resemblances which are fairly common to, or distinctive of, the members of a kind” (Gert 1995: 183).⁶ If this were the case, objection 1 would be in serious trouble, its principal charge of lack of discrimination in determining similarity or resemblance being at odds with such claims.

However, there is a problem with relying on the notion of *relevant* similarities or resemblances, and it is that it seems merely to provoke a modification of objection 1. This says that even under the notion of relevant similarities, the extension of concepts to qualify will be too great. Take some of the relevant resemblances Wittgenstein mentions in *PI* 66. Winning and losing is apparently one of the relevant features for games, but winning and losing are common in battles and wars, in competitions for jobs, prizes and many other contests, and yet few of these we would classify, in our ordinary usage, as ‘games’.

The same difficulty, it seems, is also likely to arise when we encounter a new phenomenon. The issue here is that anything we encounter is likely to resemble more than one phenomenon subsumed under one concept in some relevant way, and it is not

⁶ Gert thinks that the notion that shared properties are synonymous with resemblances has led interpreters to objection 1. But “‘resembles’ shouldn’t be thought of as synonymous with ‘shares properties with’”. The difference between shared properties and resemblances are, first, “not all properties contribute to resemblance” (Gert 1995: 182). For example, properties such as the relational and negative properties: we don’t say that my apple and my computer resembles each other because they are both not a unicorn, or because they are both on my desk. The second difference is explained as follows, “if resemblance is merely a matter of sharing properties then degree of resemblance should depend on something like number or percentage of properties shared”. However, according to her, this is not resemblance. She explains that we don’t count shared properties in order to determine whether two things resemble each other. Gert suggests that these two differences show us that shared properties are not synonymous with resemblances, and the confusion between the two things leads to the first objection, that everything resembles everything else.

clear how we should choose between alternatives on the basis of relevant resemblance or similarity alone.

At the heart of the issue that the modifications to objection 1 address is the recognition that, absent some other factor, notions of similarity or resemblance (or other relations) appear to be insufficient to *explain* either the decisions concerning concept categorizations that we have made historically, or the basis on which we might go about making future such decisions in the face of new phenomena. Even the restrictions introduced by applying the notion of ‘*relevant*’ to similarities takes us little further forward in that it, crucially, provides no account of how relevance is determined.

In what follows, I analyze two possible approaches to this difficulty. It is important to note that the focus in each is on identifying the principal factor that *causes* the particular decisions and not others to be made. The first approach ‘looks inside’ and places the responsibility on the psychological principles which guide us in the formation of concepts. I will call it ‘the psychological solution’. The second ‘looks outside’, and proposes that the determining factor consists in the shared interests and purposes present in a community of the language speakers. I will call this ‘the form of life solution’.⁷

‘The psychological solution’ is exemplified by Eleanor Rosch’s work. She writes, “Wittgenstein [in *PI* 67] says of family resemblance “look and see”, and ... I decided to look and see” if there is a common feature or criss-crossing similarities between different things we call by the same word (Rosch 1987: 156). To do this, Rosch performed a number of experiments aimed at determining whether people categorize objects presented to them on the basis of common features or criss-crossing similarities. She thus asked her subjects to classify different items that belonged to the same category according to their attributes, finding that they would classify items according to overlapping similarities, not according to one attribute common to all items. The findings

⁷ Note that both answers go beyond *PI* 65-67. The wording of these two passages is neutral to which answer is more compatible with the text.

support the view that, for some concepts, we do categorize the objects because of their criss-crossing similarities. This seems to provide empirical evidence for those who consider that the exclusive search for a common feature is misguided.⁸

However, and more importantly for present purposes, she observes that “human categorization should not be considered the arbitrary product of historical accident or of whimsy but rather the result of psychological principles of categorization” (Rosch 2004: 91). In other words, she directs the attention of those who would understand the principles by which objects are subsumed under concepts and, in cases of similarity, the way in which relevant similarity is determined, to empirical psychological research. For her, the classification decisions we make are driven by, and manifestations of, underlying psychological principles. According to Rosch, these principles are likely to vary by concept: her research offers detailed hypotheses about those principles that are relevant or salient for categorizing objects as birds and furniture (see Rosch (1975) and (1981)).

The second answer looks toward the community that we inhabit and suggests that it is because we share the same form of life, the same interests and needs, that we are likely to pick out the same relevant similarities in forming concepts. According to J. E. Bellamey, “the concept... is shaped by an interaction between the features of the objects subsumed under the concept, and the needs and purposes of the users of the language” (Bellamey 1990: 40). To explain his answer, he gives an example from Bambrough’s article:

Let us suppose that trees are of great importance in the life and work of the South Sea of [imaginary] Islanders, and that they have a rich and highly developed language in which they speak of the trees with which the land there is thickly clad. But they do not have names for the species and genera of trees as they are recognized by our botanists. As we walk around the island... we can easily pick out orange-trees, date palms and cedars. Our hosts...surprise us by giving the same name to each of the trees in what is from our point of view a very mixed

⁸ However, I focus here on her solution to modified objection 1, and not the details of her ‘prototype theory’. For details of the experiments, see Rosch (1975).

plantation. They point out to us what they called a mixed plantation, and we see that it is in our terms a clump of trees of the same species... It may be that the islanders classify trees as ‘boat-building trees’, ‘house-building trees’, etc., and that they are more concerned with the height, thickness and maturity of the trees than they are with the distinction of species that interest us. (Bambrough 1960: 220-221)

The salient resemblances in this example are the thickness, height and maturity of the trees. These salient resemblances are present in the objects which are subsumed under the concept on one hand, but the fact that these particular resemblances are deemed salient is a consequence of the shared interests and purposes of the language speakers, by, in the example, the use of the trees in house-building and boat-building etc. It might be that for house-building trees we need height and thickness but not maturity; for boat-building, the maturity and the thickness is more relevant but not the height, and so on. The salient resemblances are justified by the interaction between the features of the things and the needs and purposes of the speakers.⁹ This explains how some resemblances become relevant in forming family concepts.¹⁰

Gert adopts the second answer too, since she thinks that children learn from their environment how to pick up the relevant similarities for family resemblance concepts, and that “we will only succeed in teaching the child this grouping if he already experiences the world in much the same way we do” (Gert 1995: 184). In other words, the idea that “all those who share a language must be capable of recognizing the same family resemblances is one of the points Wittgenstein makes when he talks about forms of life” (Gert 1995: 184). We share the same form of life, and this is why we pick those similarities as relevant, and not others.¹¹

⁹ Note that Bambrough doesn’t address the objection directly. He was trying to explain what he takes Wittgenstein’s ‘family resemblance’ to be. However, as Bellaimy explains, Bambrough’s reading of family resemblance seems to meet the objection by appealing to the interests and needs of the speakers.

¹⁰ This, in turn, explains how our classification of the trees is different from the islanders’ because we have two different forms of life.

¹¹ Let me be clear here that there are different interpretations to what Wittgenstein means by ‘form of life’. I only focus on the answer given to objection 1, and how those commentators think of it as part of Wittgenstein’s appeal to the shared form of life of the linguistic community.

Each of these two answers recognizes that we need an extra factor in order to explain how it is that we determine that particular resemblances or similarities are relevant to the classification of particular phenomena. Whilst Rosch identifies psychological principles as the key determinant, she doesn't rule out the influence of the purposes and needs of humans in determining which similarities are relevant: "One influence on how attributes will be defined by humans is clearly the category system already existent in the culture at a given time" (Rosch 2004: 93). However, it is, of course, open to her to claim that even the form of life present in a culture itself derives from the psychological principles of its members. In addition, although Rosch is clearly animated by Wittgenstein, she does not set out in any way to interpret his text. By contrast, proponents of the 'form of life' hypothesis generally seek to justify their position on the basis of Wittgenstein's writing.

I do not intend to arbitrate between these two options here, but both seem potentially to provide the resources that interpretation C needs to counter objection 1 by explaining how the discriminations between relevant and irrelevant similarities or other relational factors might be made. It might be that, for some concepts, the 'form of life' is the additional factor; for others, it is the psychological principles; for some concepts, in addition, it might be a mixture of the two.¹²

6. Conclusions

In this paper I examined Wittgenstein's answers to the question 'do we use the same word in different cases because the cases have something in common?' We have seen that he proposes that for some concepts, there need not be such a defining common feature, but there might be different kinds of relations and affinities. We

¹² As for the contingent historical fact addressed in our discussion on interpretation B, it seems to me that we can see it as part of the 'form of life' answer. In addition, after incorporating interpretation B into interpretation C, we need not assume that before extensions are expanded, the members of the original extensions share a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Some concepts might share these conditions, and some might be 'family concepts' originally as 'the psychological solution' suggests, and in both cases the extensions might be expanded later.

term these concepts ‘family concepts’ in contrast to ‘common feature concepts’.

I examined three interpretations of *PI* 65-67. Interpretation A takes Wittgenstein to be saying that we call different things by the same word because of overlapping similarities between them, and not because of a common feature. Interpretation B adopts a socio-historical reading and holds that concepts have evolved and extended historically on the basis of some similarities. Interpretation C takes Wittgenstein to say that there are different kinds of relations and affinities which justify the use of the same word for different things; similarities are just one kind of these relations. I suggested that interpretation C is closer to the text, and better resists the objections raised, than interpretations A or B. This interpretation also denies the exclusive role of similarities in determining qualifying members, and argues such a narrow reading is likely to distort interpretation of Wittgenstein’s overall perspective on concept attribution. Instead, it proposes that similarity should be regarded as one of a number of potential relations, the others including mathematical relations, historical connections, and so on.

Interpretation C also clarifies the potential confusion caused by Wittgenstein’s own term ‘family resemblance’. It regards focus on the genetic or causal implications of the term ‘family’ as potentially misleading, preferring instead the view that ‘family resemblance’ simply indicates a grouping formed in virtue of resemblance or similarity between members. On this reading, ‘family resemblance’ concepts are a subset of ‘family concepts’. The former restricts qualification as members of the family to resemblance or similarity, whereas the latter, whilst allowing similarity, also includes other groupings or families based on relations or affinities other than resemblance.

Finally, we discussed two possible solutions to the problem of over classifications raised by objection 1, ‘the psychological solution’ and ‘the form of life solution’. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine these solutions since they both take us beyond Wittgenstein’s *PI* 65-67, and should be examined independently.

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