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Family Resemblances A Thesis about the Change of Meaning over Time

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Abstract

I argue that close examination of Wittgenstein's remarks on family resemblances (PI 65-67) shows that he is proposing a theory about the development of language over time. According to this theory, a concept is enlarged to a newly discovered object when it is similar to other objects falling under this concept. However, being empirical, theories of language-development cannot be regarded as philosophical positions. I therefore argue that Wittgenstein puts forward this theory only for therapeutical reasons. He thereby wants to bring the metaphysical question "Why do we call all games 'games'?" back to its everyday use.

1) In this paper, I would like to argue for an interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on family resemblances (PI 65-67), according to which he is talking about the development of the extension of concepts over time. I would like to start my paper by reviewing what I think is the most common reading of Wittgenstein's remarks on family resemblances. This reading is prominently exemplified by Bambrough [4] and by Baker/Hacker [3]. According to it, Wittgenstein proposes a new theory of concepts that states conditions under which it is justified to apply a concept to an object. According to Bambrough, there were traditionally two positions with regard to this question, namely realism and nominalism. Realism holds that there is a property or set of properties that holds of all and only those objects to which a concept can be justifiably applied. Nominalism holds that there is

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no such property and hence no objective justification for the application of a concept. Both realism and nominalism agree that an objective justification is only possible on the ground of a common and peculiar property. According to Bambrough, Wittgenstein denies this and claims that the application of one and the same concept to different objects can be objectively justified by a network of similarities obtaining among these objects [4, p. 217]. Similarly, Baker and Hacker write:

"What makes the various activities called 'games' into games is a complicated network of similarities" [3, p. 326]

and

"The adducing of relevant similarities justifies applications of 'game', since it is on account of the relationship among games, [...] that we correctly call games 'games' (cf. §65)." [3, p. 327]

Now, this interpretation also has to be integrated into Wittgenstein's general thesis that linguistic meaning is determined by linguistic rules. Accordingly, the received interpretation has to be formulated thus: Wittgenstein claims that there are linguistic rules stating that an object falls under a concept if it bears family resemblances with other objects falling under this concept. In this way, one can both say that it is because of linguistic rules, and that it is because of similarities that an object falls under a concept. So, the interpretations of Bambrough and Baker/Hacker come down to saying that there are linguistic rules which allow the application of a concept to an object if and only if it exhibits certain family resemblances. In this paper, I am going to refer to this view as the received interpretation.

2) In this section, I would like to argue that the reading outlined in section 1 is unsatisfactory. It is well known that there is a number of problems about family resemblance theories of concepts. I am going to name but a few to illustrate this point:¹

¹See also the list of problems in [3, p. 332-337].

- (1) There are concepts that have explicitly stated definitions. Therefore, it is clear that this theory applies only to a certain subset of concepts, the so called family resemblance concepts, but it is hard to determine which concepts are family resemblance concepts and which are not.
- (2) The notion of similarity, which figures centrally in this theory, is itself not clear, i.e., it is unclear what it means that two objects are similar. It is, for example, certainly not sufficient for two objects to be similar that they share some property. But what is sufficient, and which properties are relevant for similarity and which are not?
- (3) This account of the extension of concepts involves a regress. We said that an object falls under a concept if it is similar to other objects falling under this concept. But then the question of membership arises anew with regard to these other objects.
- (4) The most pressing of these problems is that resemblances do not seem to determine the extension of concepts in the right way. Any object is in some way similar to any other, so any object would have to fall under any concept.² This has been called the problem of underdetermination, the problem of wide open texture, or the problem of coherence. As far as I can see, there are essentially three different ways of solving this problem, either by arguing that only some similarities are relevant for the extension of a concept, or by arguing that similarities are only a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for something to fall under a concept,³ or by taking the whole

²For example, the activity of going for a walk exhibits the properties of involving exercise of the body, being done for recreation, and not being useful for anything. By virtue of these properties, going for a walk is similar to several activities that fall under the concept 'game', for example football, tennis and ring-a-ring-a-roses. But still, going for a walk is not a game. Other examples of activities that exhibit similarities with games but are not called 'game' can easily be found.

³This strategy has been applied by Wennerberg [6] and by Hunter [5]. It will also be applied in the interpretation to be proposed in this paper.

conceptual system into consideration.⁴

A great deal of the literature on Wittgenstein's family resemblance remarks is devoted to these problems. While I think that it is possible to find solutions to them and to construct a theory of concepts around the idea that membership depends on a network of similarities, I do not think that Wittgenstein intended to propose such a theory. This can be seen from the following facts: The above mentioned problems are all very obvious, i.e., the claim that membership depends on similarity is very obviously in need of refinement. On the other hand, there is no trace of any discussion or even awareness of these problems in the text of the PI. Thirdly, the PI is a carefully worked out philosophical text by a very intelligent philosopher. Therefore, it is hard to believe that the PI should contain only the central idea of a theory of concepts, the details of which still would have to be worked out. For these reasons, the received interpretation seems to be at odds with the text.

3) In this situation it might seem worthwhile to go back to the text of the PI to see exactly what Wittgenstein has in mind when he talks about family resemblances. I would like to provide an alternative interpretation of a statement Wittgenstein makes in PI 65, which seems to show quite conclusively that the received interpretation is correct: "And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language'." The only possible interpretation of this statement seems to be that the extension of concepts is determined by similarities. However, I think that this statement has to be read quite differently, namely in the light of an explanation Wittgenstein gives in PI 67b. For two reasons I think that PI 67b is to be seen as an explanation of the statement just quoted: First, the sentence following the one just quoted reads: "I will try to explain this." I think that Wittgenstein is referring us here not only to the immediately following section (PI 66), where he gives his famous account of the similarities that connect the different kinds of game, but also to the section after

⁴Kuhn proposes to solve this problem along these lines. Cf. Andersen [1].

that, PI 67. PI 66 is only meant to explain the notion of family resemblance and to show that, at least in the case of some concepts, there actually is nothing in common to the things falling under them. (See Wittgenstein’s statement of the results so far achieved in PI 66b.) Thus, PI 66 still leaves it unexplained in what sense it is because of certain similarities that we call something a game. Consequently, this section cannot be regarded as containing the entire explanation announced in PI 65. The second reason is that, in PI 67, Wittgenstein still talks about family resemblances and even explicitly returns to the question of PI 65 by asking: “Why do we call something a ‘number’?” (PI 67b) Consequently, the explanation given in the remainder of paragraph 67b is to be taken as a commentary on the claim in PI 65 that we call all these activities language because of their similarities.

If this is correct, it will be best to interpret PI 67b first, and then, in the light of this interpretation, to propose a reading of the crucial passage from PI 65 quoted above. Wittgenstein writes:

“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 we *extend* our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre.” (PI 67, my emphasis)

This quote indicates that Wittgenstein is considering the development over time of the set of objects falling under a concept. It is necessary to admit this temporal aspect, first, because Wittgenstein distinguishes between things that have hitherto been called number and things that are not yet called number, and, secondly, because he speaks of extending a concept. No interpretation ignoring this temporal aspect can be adequate. Taking these hints at a temporal process seriously will lead me to attribute to Wittgenstein a theory of language evolution according to resemblances between objects. I do not see how this conclusion can be avoided without simply treating these formulations as mistaken or at least radically misleading. However, such a theory is obviously

empirical and could turn out to be false. Therefore, I will argue in section 6 of this paper that Wittgenstein advances this theory only for therapeutic reasons.

The situation that Wittgenstein seems to have in mind here has two important features: First, we extend our concept of number to an object that hitherto has not been called number, and second, it is because of certain similarities that we do this. I would like to add some flesh to these bones and construct a more elaborate story which Wittgenstein might have had in mind: Imagine that the mathematical object which we now call the set of complex numbers has just been discovered⁵ Before this discovery, only real numbers were known to mathematicians. We can assume further that numbers were understood as things that can be ordered linearly according to greater/lesser relations. Complex numbers do not satisfy this requirement because they consist of two components so that they can only be ordered in a plane and not on a line. Therefore, the newly discovered object does not fall under the concept number. We can assume, moreover, that this newly discovered object does not clearly fall under any other concept provided in the language at that time. We can assume, I suggest, that Wittgenstein is imagining a situation in which a recently discovered object defies our classificatory system and thus forces us to adapt this system. In order to do this, we extend our concept of number such that it includes what we now call complex numbers.

It can also be noted that before this change, one could have applied the concept ‘number’ figuratively to the newly discovered object. This object exhibits a number of similarities with other kinds of number. For example, you can add and multiply complex numbers and they are defined as square roots of negative numbers. Therefore, even before the adaptation of language took place, it was intelligible and justifiable to apply the concept of number figuratively. One could say that the

⁵As a way of speaking, I will say that *one* object has been discovered, namely the one we now call the *field* of complex numbers. (A field is roughly speaking a set whose elements admit of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, such that all the usual laws of computation hold.)

complex numbers were numbers in scare quotes. This parallels the case of the activity of philosophizing and the concept 'game'. Even though it is intelligible to call philosophy a game, it does not really fall under this concept. In the same way, what we now call complex numbers, was not an instance of the concept 'number' before this concept was extended.

Now I would like to provide an interpretation of Wittgenstein's claim that we call something a number because of certain similarities. I will do this by discussing the question as to what, in the situation described above, can be regarded as the cause of the adaptation of language, i.e., the enlargement of the concept 'number'. Now, whether an object falls under a concept is in the end determined by certain linguistic rules. Therefore, in order to effect an enlargement of a concept, the linguistic rules governing the use of the concept in question have to be altered.⁶ For example, in the story I just told, it was wrong to call complex numbers numbers, because one of the rules for the application of this concept required that numbers can be ordered on a line. This rule, among others, has to be changed so that it will be correct to call complex numbers numbers. It has to become a custom or an institution (cf. PI 199) to subsume the set of complex numbers under the concept 'number'. We therefore have to consider the question why such a change of linguistic rules might occur.

In the story Wittgenstein seems to have had in mind, the rules of language changed because the newly discovered object defied the classificatory system of the language, i.e., the language, as it was before the adaptation, was unable to deal with this object. So, what caused the adaptation of the language was the discovery of an object that couldn't be dealt with, i.e., couldn't be classified. It is important here to note that it was not the presence of similarities between what we now call complex numbers and other kinds of number that

caused the change of the linguistic rules. That the presence of such similarities cannot be the cause of such a change, is a lesson which can be drawn from the problem of wide open texture. If the mere presence of similarities was sufficient to effect a change of the rules of language, the fact that philosophy bears certain similarities to games would have to lead to a change in the rules of language. According to the view proposed here, the emergence of objects that cannot be classified causes the adaptation of the rules of language. However, not every discovery of a hitherto unknown object makes it necessary to adapt language. Some of these new objects will be unproblematic with regard to their classification.

What, then, does Wittgenstein mean when he says that it is because of certain similarities that we call an object 'number'? Even though it is not the role of the similarities to cause an adaptation of the language, they determine how, or in what way, the language is adapted, if it is adapted at all. We extend the concept of number so as to include the complex numbers, and not some other concept, because the complex numbers were similar to other kinds of number. So, Wittgenstein's claim here is that the language is adapted by enlarging one of those concepts that have family resemblance ties to the defiant new object. When a recently discovered object makes it necessary to adapt our classificatory system, then similarities determine which concept we extend in order to be able to classify the new object. In this sense it is because of certain resemblances that we call a newly discovered object 'number'.

To summarize my interpretation of PI 67b: Wittgenstein says in PI 67 that we call something a number because of certain similarities. This means that we give the name 'number' to a newly discovered object that defies our classificatory system if it exhibits similarities with other objects falling under the concept 'number'. We give this object the name 'number', and not some other name, because of these similarities. Thus, according to my interpretation, the verb to call in PI 67 has to be understood in the sense of giving a name to something, while the received interpretation understands it in the sense of calling something by a name it already has. Both interpretations of the

⁶Technically speaking, to change the rules governing the use of a concept is to change the intension of that concept, and that in turn will change its extension. In the example under consideration, we adapt the meaning of the concept 'number' so that its extension is enlarged so as to include the new object.

verb ‘to call’ are of course possible, and this is also true for the German original ‘*nennen*’.

After this interpretation of PI 67, I would like to explain my interpretation of the statement “And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all ‘language’.” (PI 65), which turned out to be the main pillar for the received interpretation. As I argued above, PI 67 has to be regarded as an explanation of this statement. However, we can hardly read this statement in the same way as PI 67, i.e., as talking about ‘baptizing’ a new object. This is, on the one hand, because Wittgenstein uses the verb ‘to call’ in the present tense, and, on the other hand, because he is talking about “them all” (i.e., all activities called language) and not about a single object as in PI 67. Therefore, if we read ‘to call’ here in the sense of ‘to give a name to something’, this statement would claim that we now give the name ‘language’ to a whole set of activities. This is plainly false. Rather, Wittgenstein seems to be claiming here that the members of a certain set of activities today bear the name ‘language’, and that this is because of certain resemblances. Therefore, we have to read ‘to call’ here as ‘to call something by a name it already has’. However, PI 67 can also serve to explain the claim that all these activities bear the name ‘language’ because of their family resemblances: All these activities are called ‘language’ (today) because, when they first were discovered, or invented, or evolved, we gave this name to them. And we gave the name ‘language’ to them, rather than some other name, because of certain similarities. So, when Wittgenstein claims in PI 65 that there is nothing in common to all the phenomena called language, and that we call them all language because of similarities, he wants to say that this concept, as many other concepts like ‘game’ or ‘number’, has undergone a historical development in the course of which it was extended to new phenomena that were similar to some others falling under these concepts. The resemblances are the reason that the concept of language developed the way it did, such that we now call all those phenomena language we do.

It might be argued against my reading that it puts too much weight on a few allusions to a temporal process in PI 67 while it ignores the fact

that most of Wittgenstein’s assertions regarding family resemblances have nothing to do with such a process. My answer to this objection is that Wittgenstein is talking about a temporal process only in his explanation of the (because-of-) relation between similarities and extensions of concepts, which he had claimed in PI 65b. And this explanation is indeed very short, it takes up only PI 67b. All the other paragraphs from PI 65b on do not aim at explaining this relation. I would like to give a list of what I think these other paragraphs are about: PI 65b formulates the question why we today call many different things by a common name and indicates Wittgenstein’s answer that this is because of certain similarities. So, this paragraph discusses states of affairs that obtains today, and therefore does not refer to a temporal process. Sections 66 and 67a explain the idea of a network of similarities and motivate the term ‘family resemblances’. Consequently, they do not refer to a temporal process either. PI 67b then explains, by claiming that a certain historical process took place, why we today use language the way we do. PI 67c, again, does not mention a temporal process. This is because this paragraph is meant to refute the idea that a disjunction of properties might count as something common and peculiar to the things falling under a concept. Finally, the text from PI 68 on is concerned with the usability of concepts with vague boundaries. In short, the fact that Wittgenstein most of the time does not talk about temporal processes does not cast doubt on my interpretation. This textual fact can be accounted for by seeing that the explanation of the relation between similarities and extensions of concepts is indeed very short, and that elsewhere in these sections, Wittgenstein is aiming at things other than explaining this relation.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: Section 4 explains how my reading allows for a solution for the problem of wide open texture, and section 5 comments on interpretations proposed by Wennerberg and Hunter, which are similar to mine. Section 6 then deals with the problem that the theory of language development attributed here to Wittgenstein is empirical. There I will argue that he advanced it only for therapeutic

reasons.

4) Apart from the textual evidence for the historical reading found in PI 67, there is another argument in favor of it, namely that the problem of wide open texture can be solved in a straightforward fashion. As I mentioned before, the received interpretation, saying that an object falls under a concept if and only if it is similar to other things falling under that concept, leads to the problem that the extensions of concepts would have to be much wider than they actually are. This problem arises because the received interpretation takes the presence of similarities to be a sufficient condition for an object's falling under a concept. At first sight, it might seem that a corresponding problem arises also for my interpretation. One might argue that, according to my interpretation, a concept is extended to every object that has family resemblances with other objects already falling under the concept. However, this argument ignores the role which similarities play according to my interpretation. Their role is not to cause enlargements of concepts but only to determine which concept is enlarged. The similarities determine only how language is changed, if it is changed at all. Consequently, similarities are only necessary but not sufficient for extending a concept to a new object. When an activity exhibits resemblances with games, it does not follow that the concept 'game' will be extended to this activity. In this way, the historical interpretation avoids the problem of wide open texture.

5) Interpretations similar to mine have already been proposed by Hunter [5] and by Wennerberg [6]. Like me, Hunter thinks that Wittgenstein's remarks are to be taken in a sociological sense:

“Wittgenstein could have used the ‘because of’, not in the criterial sense, as it is natural to suppose, but in this kind of sociological sense.”

According to Hunter, Wittgenstein thinks

“that in the evolution of language the extension of a concept may have been gradually enlarged, here to include this, because of such an such a similarity, and

there to include that, because of a quite different similarity.” [5, p. 54]

However, Hunter fails to distinguish between the use of ‘because of certain similarities’ in PI 65 and in PI 67. Only in the latter place does Wittgenstein argue that our concepts are enlarged according to (because of) similarities. In PI 65, Wittgenstein says that the concept of game, for example, has the extension it has today, because it has been gradually enlarged according to (and in this sense because of) similarities. Thus it can also be said that the concept ‘game’ has the extension it has today because of certain similarities. So, my view is that Hunter's interpretation is a correct interpretation of PI 67 but not of PI 65. Hunter himself regards his sociological interpretation as an interpretation of PI 65.

Wennerberg is another scholar who proposed to read the remarks on family resemblances as a thesis about the evolution of language. However, he does not base his interpretation on textual evidence. One gets the impression that Wennerberg adopts his reading only because it allows for a plausible solution of the problem of wide open texture. Wennerberg argues that, faced with this problem, Wittgenstein could either give a much more exact definition of similarity or

“he could admit that family resemblances between a set of objects is not a sufficient but only a necessary condition for the existence of a general term which denotes these objects. I think he took the latter view.” [6, p. 117]

Wennerberg goes on to explain:

“When a new object emerges that has not yet been subsumed under any term it will be subsumed under some term A because it is similar to some of the objects already subsumed under A.” [6, p. 117]

Wennerberg argues that such similarities cannot be sufficient for the enlargement of a concept by considering the case that a new object has family resemblances to several concepts. In such a case, why is this object subsumed under one concept rather than another?

“People make a decision to subsume the new object under A and not under B. Such a decision is similar to a convention but this does not mean that it is completely arbitrary.” [6, p. 118]

The word ‘decision’ should be read in scare quotes here. What Wennerberg is getting at, seems to be that it somehow has to become a custom or an institution to apply the concept to a new object. Without such a ‘decision’ there would be no change of the rules of language. And the mere presence of similarities does not force the linguistic community to enlarge a concept to an object.

Interestingly, Wennerberg notes the following problem for his interpretation:

“This theory is partly of an empirical nature: it tries to explain why we classify objects as we do.” [6, p. 119]

His reading attributes an empirical claim about the development of language to Wittgenstein, a claim that does not seem to belong in a philosophical investigation. The empirical nature is clear from the following consideration: Even if we accept that the emergence of a new object that defies our classificatory system causes an adaptation of this system, it is not necessary that this adaptation should occur by enlarging a concept. We could also adapt language by introducing a new concept. Of course, this problem also exists for my interpretation, and I will propose a solution to it in section 6 of this paper.

6) Even though there is considerable textual evidence for the historical reading, and it allows for a solution of the problem of wide open texture, it has received relatively little attention. This is probably due to the fact that, according to this reading, Wittgenstein does not give a philosophically interesting answer to the question of why we call all games games. The answer my reading attributes to Wittgenstein – we call these activities games because of the historical development of language according to similarities – seems to be an empirical hypothesis rather than a philosophical theory, a hypothesis that doesn’t even belong in a philosophical investigation of language.

I think that this is correct, i.e., I have to admit that I am attributing a philosophically uninteresting claim to Wittgenstein here. However, I would argue that Wittgenstein did not mean to give a philosophical answer to the question posed by the interlocutor. Rather, his answer is to be seen in the context of his strategy of bringing “words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.” (PI 116) In order to explain the difference between these two uses of language, I would like to turn to PI 189, which, I think, provides an example of this difference. In the sections before PI 189, Wittgenstein has shown that, in the end, there is nothing one can say when a pupil insists on his way of understanding a formula (e.g., for the series ‘+ 2’). Impressed by this argument, the interlocutor asks: “But are the steps then not determined by the algebraic formula?” After remarking that this question contains a mistake, Wittgenstein gives two examples of ways in which the words “the steps are determined by the formula” are actually used in our everyday discourse.

- (1) We could use these words in a *psychological* context: Given that some people have been taught to use the formula $x = y^2$ in a certain way, whereas others do not know how to use it, one can say that for some people the steps are determined by the formula, but not for others.
- (2) We could also use these words in a *mathematical* context: There are algebraic formulae that uniquely determine a number x for a given value of y (e.g., $x = y^2$), and others that do not uniquely determine a value (e.g., $x \neq y$). In this context, one can say that some formulae determine the steps to be taken, while others do not.

According to Wittgenstein, these are two ways in which we actually use the words ‘Are the steps determined by the formula?’, i.e., they constitute everyday uses. However, the interlocutor is not likely to be satisfied with these answers. When he inquired into how formulae determine the steps to be taken, he did not use the word ‘determine’ in the psychological sense that some people know how to use a certain sign, nor in the mathematical

sense of unique determination. Nor does he seem to use the word ‘determine’ in any other sense in which it is ordinarily used by us. This dissatisfaction with such practical answers shows that the interlocutor does not understand the question in an everyday way, but in a metaphysical or philosophical way. So, PI 189 shows that there are several ways of understanding one and the same question and that some of these ways are everyday ones, which Wittgenstein deems legitimate, and that others are metaphysical or philosophical ones, which contain a mistake. Something similar can be found in PI 85. Here, Wittgenstein considers the question as to whether a sign-post leaves room for doubt or not. Wittgenstein first gives a philosophical answer, namely that the sign-post does not leave room for doubt, even though it could be interpreted in several ways. However, at the end of this section, he corrects himself and writes:

“Or rather: it sometimes leaves room for doubt and sometimes not. And now this is no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one.”⁷

I hope that it is intuitively clear that there is a difference between understanding a question in a philosophical way and understanding it in an everyday way. However, it is hard to state in general terms what this difference consists in. One clue is given by the fact that using words metaphysically is something illegitimate in Wittgenstein’s eyes. For Wittgenstein, speaking is part of an activity (cf. PI 23), i.e., it is interwoven with non-linguistic actions (cf. PI 7). This activity, in the course of which we use linguistic utterances, can be regarded as the context of this utterance. The meaning of an expression depends on the context in which it is uttered, and, divorced from its context, an utterance has no meaning at all. Thus, it can be assumed that using words metaphysically generally consists in using them outside any such context and interwovenness with other activities.

⁷Another example of a proposition mentioned by Wittgenstein that can both be understood in an everyday way and a metaphysical way is “One cannot step into the same river twice” (cf. TS 220, §111).

Gordon Baker has argued that the metaphysical use of language is characterized by a concern for properties that hold generally and without exception [2]. I think that I can agree with this conclusion, which is also exemplified in the two cases just considered. In the case of PI 189, the interlocutor is looking for a property that explains *in general* how formulae determine the steps to be taken. Wittgenstein’s everyday kind of answers, on the other hand, do not say anything about formulae in general. They say that *some* formulae uniquely determine a value and others do not. In the case of PI 85, there is the philosophical question of whether sign-posts *in general* leave room for doubt. Wittgenstein’s everyday kind of answer, again, is not general: He says that *some* sign-posts leave room for doubt. In this sense, I can agree with Baker’s conclusion that the metaphysical use of language is concerned with the essences of things (cf. [2, p. 298f]).

Next, I would like to consider the question as to what Wittgenstein means by bringing words back to their everyday use.⁸ The phrase “bringing the metaphysical use back to an everyday use” could simply be understood as “stopping to use words metaphysically”. However, this interpretation cannot account for the fact that Wittgenstein talks of ‘bringing back’. As an alternative, I would like to submit the interpretation that bringing back a metaphysical question to an everyday use involves assuming that it was uttered in a certain everyday kind of context, a context in which that question is interwoven with other activities, and in which it has an ordinary and humble sense (cf. PI 97). This is what Wittgenstein does in PI 189. As we have seen, the interlocutor poses a metaphysical question and his words do not seem to stand in any ordinary kind of context. Wittgenstein reacts by saying that it could be seen as standing, for example, in a psychological context or in a mathematical context. Then the question would acquire a certain meaning and could be answered in one way or the other. So, I think that bringing words back to an everyday use consists in relocating them into an everyday kind of context.

Now, Wittgenstein seems to be applying the

⁸Baker does not address this question in his article (cf. [2, p. 290]).

same strategy in the family resemblance remarks. When the interlocutor comes up with the question ‘Why do we call all games games?’, he certainly expects to get a metaphysical answer, something on par with his own view that there is an essence common to all games. He wants to know why we call many different objects by a common name, i.e., he inquires into the essence of the relationship between a concept and its instances. So, the interlocutor is using this question metaphysically in PI 65. Wittgenstein, however, reacts by making an empirical claim about the development of language, i.e., he reacts as if the interlocutor had uttered his question in the context of a discussion about the historical development of language. In such a context, this question, which amounts to an illegitimate metaphysical question in the mouth of the interlocutor, has an ordinary and humble sense: ‘Why do we call all games games?’ can be taken to express the question for the laws that govern the historical development of the set of objects falling under a concept. According to my interpretation, Wittgenstein takes the interlocutor’s question in this ordinary and humble way and answers it by making an empirical claim about the evolution of language.

If it is true that Wittgenstein presents this empirical family resemblance theory of language development in order to bring the interlocutor’s metaphysical question back to an ordinary context, then we can assume that he does not really want to defend this particular hypothesis. He puts it forward only in order to indicate what kind of answer could sensibly be given to the interlocutor. This explains why Wittgenstein introduces his answer with the words “well, perhaps”. He writes:

“Why do we call something a number?
Well, perhaps because it has a direct relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number;” (PI 67, my emphasis, in German “*Nun etwa*”)

To sum up: It could be objected that the historical interpretation ascribes to Wittgenstein a philosophically uninteresting answer to the interlocutor’s question. I have to admit that this is true. In my view, however, the account of family resemblances is not meant to be a philosophically

interesting theory, just as the remark that formulae of the kind $x = y^2$ determine a value for x and formulae of the kind $x \neq y$ do not is not meant to be philosophically interesting. Rather, the philosophically interesting thing in both cases is the way in which Wittgenstein reacts to metaphysical questions.

7) Finally, it might be asked how the historical interpretation fits into the wider context of PI 65. For reasons of space, I cannot answer this question adequately here, but still I would like to indicate what I think about this matter. As is well known, the interlocutor reproaches Wittgenstein in PI 65 with talking about language games all the time while not saying what a language game is. The interlocutor wants to know what the essential properties of language games are, i.e., he is asking for something that would correspond to the general form of a proposition. It might be objected against my interpretation that, in order to defend his decision not to look for the universal form of language, Wittgenstein has to show that there is no essential property of the instances of a concept. To do this, the objection goes, he has to propose a new theory of concepts that has to prove more adequate than the traditional one. On my reading, Wittgenstein does nothing of this sort, he does not even engage in a philosophical (metaphysical) discussion with the interlocutor.

However, I do not see why the burden of proof is on Wittgenstein to show that there is no essence of language. In PI 1-64, he has introduced his method of language games, and he has shown that it is a powerful tool to get rid of metaphysical problems. So, Wittgenstein can be quite satisfied with what he has achieved, and this achievement is independent of whether or not there exists a general form of language. Therefore Wittgenstein can simply let himself off the hook with regard to this search – *er schenkt sich die Suche* (cf. PI 65a). This last phrase indicates that Wittgenstein does not bother to look for an essence of language. He thinks it unlikely that it exists and he can do very well without it. If, on the other hand, the interlocutor was able to show that there has to be an essence to each concept, it seems that then also Wittgenstein would be obliged to look for it, be-

cause in this case it seems possible to achieve much greater clarity by finding this essence than by using Wittgenstein's method of language games. Therefore, Wittgenstein only has to refute arguments proposed by the interlocutor for the thesis that each concept must have an essence. Assuming this as true, the argumentative structure of PI 65-77 can be seen as follows: The interlocutor offers three different arguments for the claim that for each concept there has to be an essence. The first argument is discussed in PI 65-67, the second in PI 68-71, the third in PI 75-77. The sections PI 72-74 form an appendix to the second argument.

In PI 65, the interlocutor implicitly puts forward the argument that there must be something in common to the instances of a concept because we use one and the same name for them all. He brings up the question 'Why do we call all of these different things by one and the same name?'⁹ and assumes that the only possible answer is 'There is something common and peculiar to all of them'. According to my interpretation, Wittgenstein refutes this argument in a very peculiar (Wittgensteinian) way: By bringing the interlocutor's question back from the metaphysical to an everyday use. Wittgenstein thus intimates that the interlocutor's argument involves a misuse of language. In PI 68-71 Wittgenstein discusses the question whether concepts without fixed boundaries, such as concepts without essence would be, would be useful at all. Therefore, these sections can be read as the refutation of another argument for the claim that there has to be an essence: The argument that without essence, concepts would be useless. Finally, PI 75-77 discuss what it means to know the meaning of a concept. Here, the interlocutor argues implicitly that our knowledge of meanings can only consist in subconscious knowledge of an essence. Wittgenstein refutes this by drawing attention to the way in which we explain concepts to others and by saying that such explanations already contain our entire knowledge of the meaning of concepts.

⁹He brings up this question only implicitly. In the text of PI 65 we only find Wittgenstein's reaction to such a question.

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