

“The Lives of Families”: Towards a Genealogical Reading of Family Resemblance

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Wittgenstein and Genealogy?

- In recent years, genealogy has become an increasingly central topic in both analytic and continental philosophy.
- For all its internal diversity, the growing literature on genealogy is unified by a shared historical sensitivity: different approaches treat our concepts not as fixed and timeless entities, but as products of complicated and contingent historical processes.
- There remains significant debate about the extent to which Wittgenstein's work sufficiently engages with the historical dimension of our life in language.
- Sluga 2014, 11: "When we read Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* we are struck by his continuing lack of attention to language as a historical phenomenon."
- Thesis: Wittgenstein's analogy between the unity of a concept and the unity of a family carries a historical dimension into his reflections on concepts, one the reception of family resemblance has largely, though not entirely, underplayed.

A dominant reading
obscures the
historical aspect of
family resemblance
by approaching it
from a broadly
synchronic
perspective

Bambrough, 1961: Wittgenstein solved “the problem of universals” by showing that **general terms apply to items in virtue of overlapping similarities that obtain among those items.**

Blackburn 2008: “[Family resemblance is] the phenomenon stressed in his later work by Wittgenstein, that **the objects denoted by a term may be tied together not by one common property, but by a network of resemblances,** like the persons whose faces share features characteristic of a family.”

Baker and Hacker 2005, 10: “[Wittgenstein] now denies that a concept-word applies to all things that fall under it in virtue of their possession of common properties. It need not be so, and in the case of family-resemblance concepts, it is not so. **The unity of such concepts consists in the overlapping similarities between members of the family.**”

Forster 2010, 67: “... contrary to a certain picture of how all general concepts work, according to which they apply to their particular instances in virtue of some single common feature which all the instances share and which can be captured in a definition, **some general concepts, for example the concept ‘game’, apply in virtue of multiple features which not all their instances share and which defy capture in a definition.**”



This dominant reading captures an important aspect of Wittgenstein's use of the family analogy—that of resemblance or similarity—but leaves in the background another aspect.

It leaves out the dimension exploited by the genealogical tradition: the life of a family unfolds over time, and thus the unity of a family is not given in advance but is constituted through contingent developments over the course of history.

In the critical tradition of Nietzsche and Foucault, the historical dimension of genealogical inquiry is described as having an unsettling, destabilizing, and potentially transformative effect.

Foucault 1971: “The search of descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself.”

Structure of the talk

- Does Wittgenstein's family analogy treat conceptual unity in a similar way – as historically made rather than given, and so as more open to transformation than we have assumed?
- My aim is to prepare the ground for a conversation between Wittgenstein and critical genealogy by bringing the historical dimension of family resemblance more clearly into view. I will:
 1. discuss Hans Sluga's criticism of family resemblance as “systematically ambiguous”;
 2. suggest that family resemblance should be understood as a form of conceptual unity over time, rather than a merely synchronic account of what holds together the instances of the concept as a given moment;
 3. consider some remarks that more clearly bring out the historically unfolding, dynamically structured character of family resemblance.

Sluga on Family Resemblance

Sluga 2006, 14: “The notion of family resemblance is more problematic than Wittgenstein allows for and that is one reason why it cannot serve as grounding for a comprehensive theory of concepts or general terms. **It is problematic in that its characterization draws on two quite different sets of ideas, two different vocabularies but treats them as if they were one and the same.** The first is the vocabulary of kinship, of descent, of some sort of real and causal connection and of the links established by them, the second is that of similarity, resemblance, affinity, and correspondence. It appears that Wittgenstein fails to appreciate the genuine difference between these two ways of speaking and that his characterization of family resemblance combines both in a single formula.”

Sluga's Solution

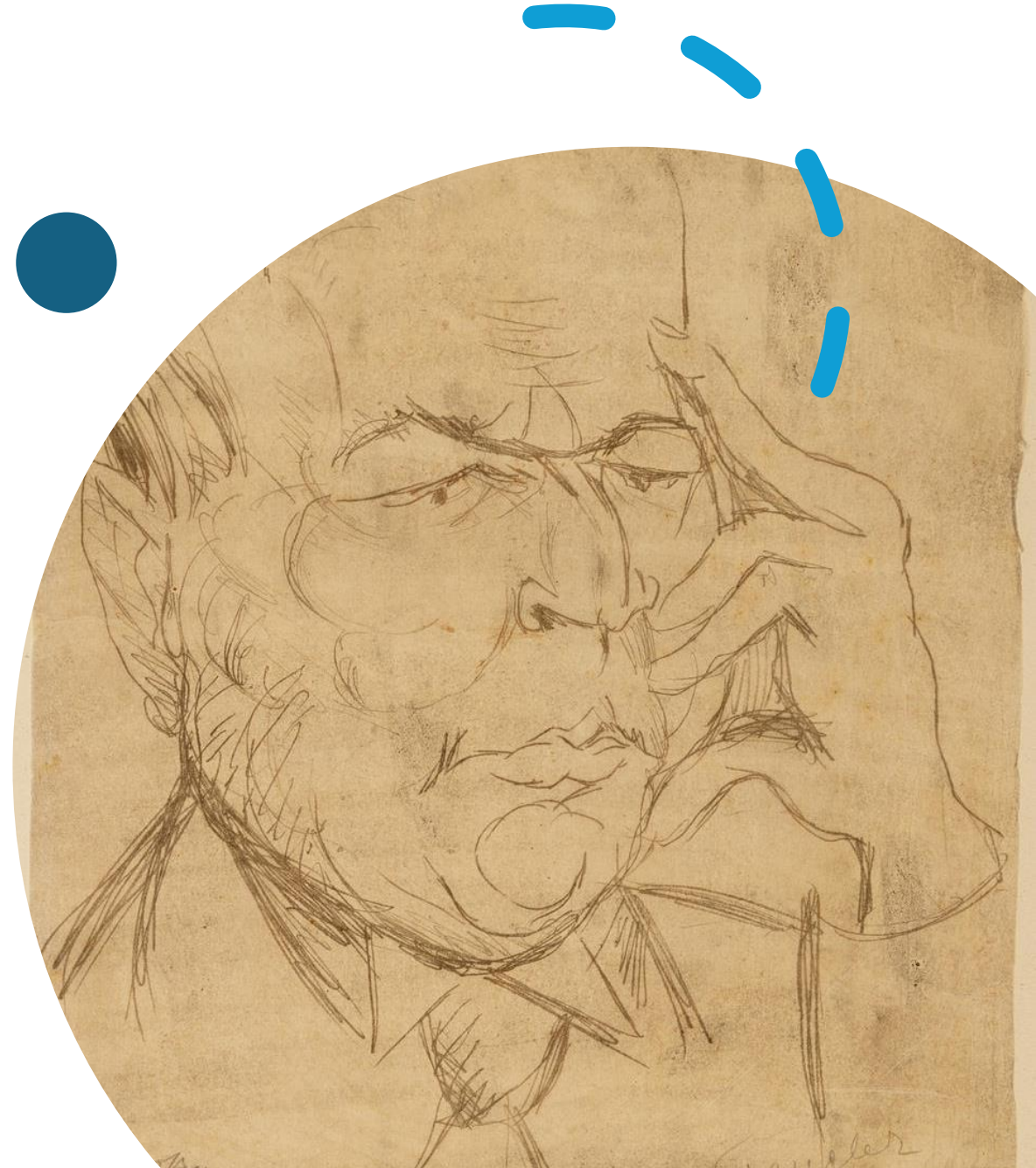
Sluga 2006, 15: “We must, so it seems, distinguish between two kinds of concepts which Wittgenstein lumps together under the heading of family resemblance. The first we may want to call kinship concepts, meaning not necessarily only biological kinship, but any kind of appropriate causal connection. The second variety we may for obvious reasons call similarity concepts. The two kinds of concepts are very different and while both may turn out to resist formal definition the reasons why they do so are at variance.”

Sluga 2011, 87: “There are certainly concepts that apply to groups of items simply because of overlapping and crisscrossing similarities. Wittgenstein may be right in thinking, for instance, that “game” is such a concept.”

- The assumption that similarities alone can ground the unity of a concept is difficult to sustain. It has been challenged in different forms in the literature under what has been variously called the “problem of wide-open texture” (Richman 1962) and the “under-determination of extension” (Bellaimey 1990).
- Activities we ordinarily classify as games, such as chess, bear overlapping resemblances with other activities we also call games, such as tennis or golf. They also share similarities with practices we do not ordinarily classify as games, such as judo (see Schroeder 2017).

Wittgenstein on Spengler in 1931

“Spengler could be better understood if he said: I am comparing different periods of culture with the lives of families; within a family there is a family resemblance, though you will also find a resemblance between members of different families; family resemblance differs from the other sort of resemblance in such and such ways, etc.” (CV, 14; BT, 58)



The intergenerational aspect of family resemblance

“A purely synchronic perspective on a family resemblance structure will make it almost impossible to understand how or why a univocal concept can be forged through a chain of overlapping resemblances ...

this failure to see the diachronic in the synchronic is not just a failure to absorb one of the key lessons of Wittgenstein's notion of a language-game; it is also a literary failure—a failure properly to take account of the implications of the imagery Wittgenstein deploys in attempting to make this point. For of course, **family resemblances hold not just across space but across time**; a son inherits his father's build, a daughter her grandmother's eyes—and even when the similarity holds between two members of the same generation, say a brother and sister, it holds because they share a common ancestor, from whom their distinctive gait or temperament is derived (whether by nature or nurture)” (Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, 85)



Philosophical Grammar: “many different transitions”

“What a concept-word indicates is certainly a kinship between objects, but this kinship need not be the sharing of a common property or a constituent. It may connect the objects like the links of a chain, so that one is linked to another by intermediary links. Two neighbouring members may have common features and be similar to each other, while distant ones belong to the same family without any longer having anything in common. Indeed even if a feature is common to all members of the family it need not be that feature that defines the concept.

The relationship between the members of a concept may be set up by the sharing of features which show up in the family of the concept, crossing and overlapping in very complicated ways.

Thus there is probably no single characteristic which is common to all the things we call games. But it can't be said either that “game” just has several independent meanings (rather like the word “bank”). What we call “games” are procedures interrelated in various ways with many different transitions between one and another.” (GP, 74-5)

Early 1930s Cambridge Lectures: “gradual transitions”

“In view of the way we have learned the word “good” it would be astonishing if it had a general meaning covering all of its applications. I am not saying it has four or five different meanings. It is used in different contexts because there is a transition between similar things called “good”, a transition which continues, it may be, to things which bear no similarity to earlier members of the series. We cannot say “If we want to find out the meaning of 'good' let's find what all cases of good have in common”. They may not have anything in common. The reason for using the word “good” is that there is a continuous transition from one group of things called good to another.” (AWL, 33)

“If we wanted to lay down rules for “good” or “beautiful” or “game”; we should in different cases have to compare different games with that particular use. And if we ask why the same word is used in all these ways, the reason need not be that there's anything in common, but that there's a gradual transition. The thing you say in the end may not be what you meant in the beginning, though it has a connection through gradual transitions. ... So it may be very difficult to find anything in common between 2 uses of “good”, but there will be gradual transitions from one to the other, which take the place of something in common.” (MWL, 324-5)

PI §67: “spinning a thread”

“I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family a build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth – overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.

And likewise the kinds of number, for example, form a family. Why do we call something a “number”? Well, perhaps because it has a – direct – affinity with several things that have hitherto been called “number”; and this can be said to give it an indirect affinity with other things that we also call “numbers”. **And we extend our concept of number, as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre.** And the strength of the thread resides not in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.” (PI §67)

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