

DYADIC SIMILARITY AND FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

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The essentialist view of resemblance is that all, and only, those particulars resemble one another which share at least one property. Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, developed with the concept of games, clearly departs from this view. What is not so clear is the degree, the extent, of the departure. Certain of Wittgenstein's major expositors interpret him as proposing a mere modification of essentialism, as advocating what I call the "weak family resemblance view." I think such interpretations overlook the difficulty in understanding Wittgenstein on this point and they may misread the radical extent of his departure from essentialism. The primary purpose of this paper is to show that there is a problem of understanding Wittgenstein's view, not to provide the answer to that problem. In the first section I mainly argue that evidence is lacking for the weak family resemblance interpretation; the section concludes by claiming that at least some evidence points toward what I call the "strong family resemblance" interpretation. In the second section I show how two commentaries attribute the weak view to him and do so uncritically.

I

Now, in denying the essentialist view, Wittgenstein could be making either of two claims:

- (a) It is not the case that each game must share a property with all other games, though it is the case that each game must share a property with at least one other game.
- (b) It is not the case that each game must share a property with all other games, and it is not the case that each game must share a property with any other game.

The first denial expresses the weak family resemblance view, the second expresses the strong family resemblance view. Wittgenstein could be claiming either that (a) "game" is applied to an activity not by virtue of one property which it shares with all other games, though it is applied by virtue of some shared property, i.e., a property shared between the activity in question

and at least one other game; or that (b) "game" is applied to an activity not by virtue of one property which it shares with all other games, nor by virtue of some shared property, i.e., a property shared between the activity in question and at least one other game. Which position does Wittgenstein take? Keith Campbell and Renford Bambrough, without acknowledging this distinction, write as if Wittgenstein clearly claims (a); but it seems to me that if he does, that he does is not clear at all. The first, and main, point with I wish to make is that he does not assert (a) and (a) cannot be inferred from what he does assert. A second point, which I will make briefly, is that (b) is more consistent with the spirit of the Investigations than is (a).

To begin, I do not find in the Investigations the assertion of (a) or a facsimile thereof, nor does it seem to me that (a) can be inferred from the text. Any argument to the contrary, in support of the view that Wittgenstein holds (a), would need, I think, to adduce Wittgenstein's abundant opposition of "common" to "all" which pervades #65, #66, and #67 of the Investigations.

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. To repeat: don't think, but look!--Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. . . And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear. (#66)

This passage does not assert (a). Can it, however, be interpreted to imply (a)? Such an interpretation would require an assumption. Now, Wittgenstein denies that there must be something common to all by positing the existence of similarities. Suppose that if any two things are to be similar they must have something in common, they must share a property. If we can accept this assumption, that similarity requires at least one shared property, we can accept that Wittgenstein's denial that there must be something common to all, a

denial formulated as the positing of similarities, implies some sharing of properties, not at least one property shared by all individuals within the group, but at least one property shared by each member of the group with at least one other member of the group. In other words, we can accept the claim that the passage implies (a).

But can we accept the assumption? The assumption may seem axiomatic, almost tautological. How could similarity exist other than by virtue of at least one shared property? C. Mason Myers has argued, however, that this assumption not only is not tautologous, it is false. (Myers, 1962) Qualities which are similar but not by virtue of either a shared or similar property Myers describes as "dyadically similar." I will apply the term to particulars: Those particulars are dyadically similar which are similar by not by virtue of a shared property; rather, they are similar--and here they differ from Myers' dyadically similar qualities--by virtue of at least one pair of similar properties. Particulars which are similar by virtue of a shared property I will speak of as "triadically similar."

For the purpose of this paper, I need not recount Myers' arguments that such properties exist. I need only note that it is at least logically possible that they do: The concept of similarity does not preclude a species which is dyadic. In other words, there are three possible kinds of similarity, not two. First, there is what I call "universally triadic similarity" (I). If x is a game by virtue of universally triadic similarity, x must share at least one, i.e., selfsame, property with all other games. Everyone seems to agree that Wittgenstein repudiates the claim that all similarity is of this sort. Second, there is what I call "particularly triadic similarity" (II). If x and z are games by virtue of particularly triadic similarity, while they themselves need not share a property, they must share (different) properties with y which is also a game. The authors whom I examine believe that Wittgenstein's departure from the essentialist view consists in the claim that (I) is not a necessary condition for similarity because (II) is a sufficient condition for similarity. In their opinion, apparently, the departure consists in nothing more than that.

But similarity can also be conceived of as dyadic (III). If u and w are similar by virtue of dyadic similarity, they share neither a property with each other nor (different) properties with v, which is also a game, but are, nevertheless, similar. They are similar by virtue of Myers' dyadically similar properties. The sharing of properties plays no role in their similarity. Now, whether such particulars exist is irrelevant for the present argument. What is relevant is that they are logically possible. Since they are logically possible, for a philosopher to deny, through the positing of similarities, that all instances of games are instances of (I), as Wittgenstein does, is not for him to be logically committed to

predicating that denial on the conjunction (A) that there are also instances of (II) and that there are no instances of (III). We cannot draw this inference since he might be predicating that denial on the conjunction (B) that there are also instances of (II) and there are also instances of (III). Thus, Wittgenstein's denial of theories based entirely on the first conception (I) does not constitute proof that he is not affirming a view based in part on the third conception (III), and we are thus left with a question: What is his position? We cannot say a priori. But readers will try to say if they assume, and hence if they assume that Wittgenstein assumes, that triadic similarity (universal and particular) is the only kind of similarity. If they make these assumptions, they will interpret him, a priori, as predicating his denial on (A) and thus as saying that while commonality need not obtain with respect to all games it does need to obtain with respect to some games, i.e., with respect to pairs or larger sub-groups, each individual sharing a property with at least one other individual. They will attribute to him the weak view of family resemblance even though he neither asserts (a) nor asserts a proposition or propositions from which (a) follows logically.

Now, while Wittgenstein does not assert (a), neither does he assert (b); and while (a) does not follow logically from the denial of the claim that all instances of similarity are instances of (I), Wittgenstein might think that it does. Wittgenstein, so far as I can tell, does not draw the distinctions I have drawn, between (a) and (b) and between (I), (II), and (III); and he does not clearly express his own view with one or more of these alternatives. So my argument does not establish that Wittgenstein subscribes to the strong view of family resemblance. But I think that a further consideration does point in that direction, viz., the spirit of the Investigations. Wittgenstein eschews generalizations, seeks to dissuade us of essentialism, draws our attention to concrete cases. Certainly the spirit of #66, cited earlier, is that we should not constrain particulars with preconceived theories but rather just look at and learn from the particulars. What we see, and only what we see, is what we should posit. There is an openness here to the diverse data of experience, and that openness is more consistent with (b) than with (a). Indeed, the refusal to distinguish between general kinds of similarity, e.g., (I), (II), (III), might be one way of emphasizing the multiplicity of similarity, its transcendence of our capacity to generalize; the attendant refusal to select those generalizations which express his own view might be one way of underscoring the importance of openness to the multiplicity. How far this consideration can carry us in understanding Wittgenstein I am not sure. But I do think I have established the point with which I began: The evidence does not justify interpreting Wittgenstein as holding the weak view of family resemblance.

Keith Campbell and Renford Bambrough, however, do interpret Wittgenstein to be asserting (a). Campbell writes:

But Wittgenstein is clearly contrasting the whole family, all members of which have no one thing in common, with pairs of its members, which do have things in common--things which may be picked out by inexact predicates. "Competitive," or "recreational," or "played with a ball" are examples of the family "game." (p. 239)

For Campbell, Wittgenstein's position is clear. Campbell does not consider the possibility that predicates can be "inexact" simply because the properties they pick out are dyadically similar, and that the family resemblance concept expresses that conception of inexactness.

Campbell's assumption that similarity presupposes at least one shared property leads him to an awkward conception of colors and lengths. Believing that the notion of family resemblance requires greater precision and explicitness than Wittgenstein has provided, and assuming--without acknowledging the assumption--that resemblance can only be triadic, he attempts to specify the criterion for possession of something in common. He rejects as a criterion for possessing something in common the following: a and b have something in common (viz., F-hood), just in case they are indistinguishable with respect to F. He reasons:

"This suggestion is to be rejected. It is altogether too stringent. It requires that we deny of two postage stamps that they have their color in common if we can distinguish between them with respect to color. It requires that we deny of two so-called 4-inch nails that they have a common length not only if we find that one is 3.98 inches long and the other 4.02 inches, but also if we somehow discover that they differ in length by some amount which falls within the limits of quantitative discrimination, so that we know they differ but cannot say by how much." (p. 239)

Now, we might think that there could be no better reason for saying that two stamps lack a common color than the one Campbell rejects, namely, that we can distinguish between their colors, or for saying that two nails lack a common length than that we can determine that their lengths differ. This rejection derives from two mistakes. First, Campbell assimilates having a color to having color and having a length to having length. He seems to say that the stamps have color in common even though they do not have a color in

common; he clearly says that the nails have a length in common even though he specifies that they do not. I think this conflation derives, at least in part, from the second problem, the failure to see that similarity in colors and lengths is dyadic. As Myers has argued,

Orange is similar to red and yellow but is not analyzable into them, being just as simple as they are. The fact that orange can be obtained by mixing red and yellow pigments should not mislead us on this point. Two colors cannot be at the same place at the same time and consequently if a certain area is orange we cannot say it is both red and yellow. Phenomenologically the similarity of orange to red and yellow is simply an ultimate fact--a dyadic similarity. (p. 328)

If Myers is right, stamps of similar colors need not possess a quality in common to be similar with respect to color, and so we need not resort to odd conceptions of possessing something in common in order to allow for their similarity. The point applies, mutatis mutandis, to length. But because Campbell is committed to triadic similarity as the only kind of similarity, he distorts both the nature of similarity in color and length and the nature of possessing a common property.

Bambrough himself, who is willing to walk something of a philosophical limb in his estimation that Wittgenstein has "solved" the problem of universals with his notion of family resemblance, expounds Wittgenstein's notion ambiguously and thus seems not to grasp the possibility of its thorough and novel anti-essentialism. One of his portrayals (p. 189) consists of five objects, a through e, characterized variously by predicates A through E, and arranged thus:

e	d	c	b	a
ABCD	ABCE	ABDE	ACDE	BCDE

He notes that no one predicate is found in all five objects, and then argues that since these five clearly form a family, even if some property were present in all objects, it would not be by virtue of that single common property that the objects would form a family. Bambrough has denied only that a universal applies to its instances by virtue of a property common to all of its instances. Each of the objects a through e does share at least one property with at least one other object in the family, so the similarity posited is triadic and the weak view of family resemblance is attributed to Wittgenstein.

With the example of the Churchill family, Bambrough either does, or seems to, attribute the strong view to Wittgenstein, but his discussion is ambiguous and inconclusive.

If we remember that a family face does not divide neatly into ten separate features, we widen rather than reduce the scope for large numbers of instances of the family face to lack a single common feature. And if we remember that what goes for faces goes for features too; that all cleft chins have nothing in common except that they are cleft chins, that the possible gradations from Roman nose to snub nose or from high to low cheekbones are continuous and infinite, we see that there could in principle be an infinite number of unmistakable Churchill faces which had no feature in common. In fact it now becomes clear that there is a good sense in which no two members of the Churchill family need have any feature in common in order for all the members of the Churchill family to have the Churchill face. (pp 190-191)

I find this paragraph confusing. The first sentence appears to deny the separateness of features within the family face. But whatever is being denied regarding faces is supposed to be what is being denied regarding features, for ". . . what goes for faces goes for features too. . ." Now, what is being denied regarding features is not that the elements within them are separate, as was the case with the family face and the features within it, but that there is a finite number of gradations between one instance of that feature and another instance of that feature, between, say, a Roman nose and a snub nose. So he seems to be saying something different regarding the family nose from what he says regarding the family face. Further, what he says regarding the family nose in the second sentence, viz., that between any two whole noses an infinite number of gradations exists, is relevant to the conclusion which he wishes to draw, viz., that between an infinite number of faces within the family there need be no feature in common; whereas what he says regarding the family face in the first sentence, viz., that its components are not distinct from one another, does not have this relevance as far as I can see.

But it is clear that his conclusion, that between an infinite number of faces within the family there need be no feature in common, attempts to moderate the amount of commonality which must obtain between two things for them to be legitimate members of a family. What is not so clear is what he means by, "an infinite number of unmistakable Churchill faces which had no feature in

common." Does he mean "an infinite number of faces which shared no feature with any another face in the family (b)?" Or does he mean, "an infinite number of faces which together shared no single, selfsame, feature (a)?" The passage is ambiguous. The third and final sentence suggests the assertion of either (a) or (b). It suggests the assertion of (a) if it is interpreted to mean that, among the Churchill family, any two members might share no property but still be members of the family. This claim does not deny that the reason they are members of the family is that they do share at least one property with at least one other member. On the other hand, it suggests the assertion of (b) if we interpret Bambrough to mean by "no two members" "all possible pairs," and so to attempt to say that all possible pairs need have no feature by virtue of which they are pairs, and that therefore the Churchill family does not exist by virtue of any properties by any of its members. If the last statement expresses Bambrough's claim, I would think he would attempt to explain it. For not only is this claim distinctive within his own discussion of Wittgenstein, it is a claim regarding Wittgenstein which, if accurate, as I suspect it to be, establishes Wittgenstein's radical departure from, rather than mere modification of, the essentialist tradition.

NOTES

1. Bambrough, Renford, "Universals and Family Resemblance," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1960-61, p. 207-22. Reprinted in Wittgenstein: The "Philosophical Investigations", George Pitcher, ed., (Macmillan, 1968), p. 186-204. Subsequent references will be to the latter.
2. Campbell, Keith, "Family Resemblance Predicates," American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 2, No. 3, July 1965, p. 238-44.
3. Myers, C. Mason, "Inexplicable Analogies," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, Vol. 22, March 1962, p. 326-33.
4. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Philosophical Investigations (Basil Blackwell, 1958).