

'Consider ... "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?' What does Wittgenstein hope to show with this example? Does he show it?

A historically prevalent view of language has seen logic as embedded within it, hidden and covered by the everyday use of our terms. On this view, the philosopher's job was to unearth the fundamental structure of our language and capture the essence of concepts. The later Wittgenstein, however, came to reject this view of language; offering an alternative whereby language is understood as deeply embedded in, and changed by, human forms of life. On this view, vagueness is essential to much of our language, concepts needn't have strictly defined boundaries, and our knowledge of language is constrained to the grammatical possibilities of use in everyday contexts – because of this, our inquiring should no longer aim to penetrate beneath what was previously regarded as the disorder of the everyday.

This essay will argue that with the example of 'games' Wittgenstein was demonstrating the existence of family resemblance concepts; these are both central to his alternative picture of language and are at the heart of his successful criticism of the Platonic view of language. First, I will provide some context to the example given, explaining the discussion in the *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter PI) leading up to this example, the Platonist's objection to which this example is given in response, and the Platonic view of language. I will then explain what family resemblance concepts are and how they show the Platonic view of language is false. After arguing for this position, I will consider some objections from the Platonist which I will show to fail.

Context and the Platonist's Picture

In the sections leading up to the example of games (PI, 66) Wittgenstein outlines his earlier view that composite propositions can be analysed into fundamental components. These elementary propositions are 'hidden' in the composite but are unearthed and made visible after analysis (PI, 60). For example, the proposition 'The broom is in the corner' could be analysed into the elementary propositions: 'The broomstick is in the corner'; 'The brush is in the corner'; 'The broomstick is fixed in the brush' (Ahmed 2010). This analysis was thought to give us a deeper understanding of the composite proposition. But Wittgenstein is doubtful that the analysis reveals something hidden in the original proposition, and after identifying various differences and relations between the analysandum and analysans he concludes the discussion by stating (of another example) that the two are just part of *different* language-games (PI, 64), one is not more fundamental than another, they are just two different ways of talking about the broom. The analysis is really a horizontal translation, rather than a vertical excavation.

In response to this, he faces an objection from the Platonist. The Platonist objects to Wittgenstein on the grounds that he has continuously made use of the concept of a 'language-game' but is yet to specify the essence of language-games, and of language. According to

the Platonist, Wittgenstein has got off easy by avoiding the difficult task of specifying non-trivial necessary and sufficient conditions of the term 'language' which specifies when the concept is correctly and incorrectly applied.

This objection comes from an alternative and highly influential view of language. There are three important features to this picture of language (Forster, 2010): (1) 'any general term must pick out a single common feature which is definable by means of non-trivial essential necessary and sufficient conditions governing the term's applications', this feature is otherwise known as the *essence* of the concept; (2) concepts are ontologically mind-independent and eternal objects; (3) concepts are 'sparse', there is only one concept per term, for example, there is only one concept of 'justice'. This view, or at least the first feature of it, is intuitive. We certainly seem to employ terms with rules, we seem to employ 'chair' in line with certain conditions, and it is the naïve view that we do so because of a single feature that they each have in common – after all, why else would we call each of them 'chairs'?

Family Resemblance Concepts

Here, I will show that Wittgenstein is introducing family resemblance concepts (FRCs) with the example of games. If FRCs exists, as I argue, then the first feature of the Platonic view of language is false.

Wittgenstein asks us to consider 'games', 'board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on', 'What is common to them all?' (PI, 66). He urges us to resist the temptation to say that something *must* be common to them all simply because we call each of them games, instead of thinking this he asks us to investigate them first and see what we find.

So, what do we find? We find that these phenomena have no one thing in common 'in virtue of which we use the same word for all' (PI, 65). What we find is a 'complicated network of similarities overlapping and cross-crossing' (PI, 66). In the case of games, each of those noted above share the feature that someone can win, but in other games there isn't obviously a winner – as is the case in solitaire. Some of these games involve physical exercise, some don't. Some games are exciting, some are rather dull – think of dots and boxes. Some require skill to win, like football, but others are more a matter of luck – consider rock-paper-scissors. There are a great number of features that games have, but no single defining feature which all games have. This image of family resemblance rids us of the false necessity that all terms are strictly definable, and their essences able to be captured, by providing us with an alternative view (Mulhall, 2001).

Wittgenstein characterises these similarities as 'family resemblances', and a concept which lacks a single defining feature in virtue of which we apply the concept, the essence in the Platonist's first feature of language, is a 'family resemblance' concept. Importantly, the items falling under the extension of a FRC lack a single common *defining* feature. They can, though, share a common property, for example, it is plausible that all chairs exist in the universe, but this common property

is not the reason we apply ‘chair’ to those objects, it is not a *defining* feature.

Here, Wittgenstein is demonstrating the existence of FRCs, but he should not be thought of as making the much stronger claim that all ‘general’ concepts are family resemblance concepts. As Forster notes, Wittgenstein explicitly expresses his disdain for philosophers’ ‘craving for generality’, and also his insistence on indicating ‘differences’ – here showing the differences in our concepts. The existence of FRCs is enough to show that the Platonist’s position is false, as they claimed that *all* concepts have this rigid and definable structure.

In response, the Platonist will have to give good reasons for thinking that there are essences to all concepts, or show that Wittgenstein’s view is mistaken. In the following section, I’ll consider attempts to do the latter.

Objections

Here I’ll consider three objections from the Platonist, beginning with a potential problem of concepts without boundaries, then to Rundle’s criticism (1990), ending with a potential inconsistency between FRCs and rule-following.

The first is one Wittgenstein considers himself. If the concept ‘game’ is without definite boundaries as Wittgenstein claims, then when we use the term we don’t *really* know what we mean by it. This has intuitive appeal. When we are unsure of what someone means we ask for clarification, and it can be provided by specifying some situations in which the unclear statement would be true (Ahmed, 2010). If they say that they had tried much harder than normal on a maths test, but we are unsure what they mean exactly, they could clarify by stating those situations which are normal for them. They might respond by saying that normally they don’t prepare at all for a maths test, but this week they spent each evening revising – this would be a way of stating more precisely what they meant previously. This seems like a natural way of gaining clarification. If they couldn’t answer such questions, it would seem as though they didn’t know what they meant. So, if someone claims “the entire town was joining in in all sorts of games”, and we ask them what they mean by ‘games’ but fail to get these clarifying responses whereby they are able to tell me if a certain example is or isn’t a game, then it will seem as though they didn’t know what they originally meant. Without strict borders, it seems that there will be plenty of examples in which someone is unable to tell me whether it is or is not a game – they won’t *really* know what they mean by ‘game’. This is untenable, so Wittgenstein’s account should be rejected.

Wittgenstein’s response is to answer with the rhetorical question: if he says that “The ground was quite covered with plants”, are we to say that he doesn’t know what he’s talking about if he can’t give a definition of ‘plant’? It appears we can talk about many things without knowing exactly how to define them, assuming we could satisfactorily do so. If we did find that after proposing many candidates of plants Wittgenstein could not tell us whether one was or was not a plant,

perhaps we would be in a position to say that he did not know what he meant (Ahmed, 2010), depending on whether we think the examples are more or less difficult to categorise (etc.). But he certainly need not be able to classify *all* items in order to make claims about plants, he just needs to know enough examples of plants and the sorts of features they typically have in order to know what he means. What he meant was not anything that was particularly precise, of the types and the pattern of their distribution for example, he was expressing a vague observation – using words that correspond in their vagueness to the thought he intended to express. Wittgenstein would likely go further and say that in general the knowledge of various examples and similarities exhausts our knowledge of language (apart from specialist cases). What we know of language is more like ‘how a clarinet sounds’, rather than how high a mountain is (PI, 78), but it is the fact about the mountain that the objector requires us to know. The knowledge we have available to us just is how those terms are used in everyday instances, this is what he means when he says that our inquiry is into the ‘possibilities’ of phenomena – what term is grammatically acceptable to put where – rather than trying to penetrate beneath the everyday (PI, 90). But this alternative epistemic view of language need not lead us to think we must trade off precision and rigour (Mulhall, 2010), as it also needn’t require we trade off the ability to know what we’re talking about.

Second, Bede Rundle (1990) objects to Wittgenstein’s account of family resemblance concepts on the grounds that no concept could have this structure, because if it did then two items could fall within the concept’s extension without having anything in common. He claims that if we did have two games which really did have nothing of relevance in common then we could not apply the term to both unambiguously – we would instead have to ‘ascribe more than one meaning to that term’. We could not mean the same thing by it, while consistently applying it to two entirely different items, so it must have multiple meanings. But Wittgenstein doesn’t seem to think that FRCs have multiple meanings; in the *Blue Book* (p28) Wittgenstein contrasts words that have ‘several clearly defined meanings’ and words used in a ‘thousand different ways which gradually merge into one another’ (FRCs). But then how could two entirely different items have the same concept unambiguously applied to them?

As Mulhall rightly argues (2001), Rundle fails to distinguish between two instances of cases like these: in the first case two items are linked by a ‘chain of overlapping resemblances’ passing between intermediate items; in the second case there is no such chain. We might find a case like the second where someone invents a new language-game and stipulates the application of a term to two entirely different objects. Here we would be right to be suspicious of this term having a univocal application. But such suspicion often dissolves when we are made aware of the historical process by which the common application has become accepted in other cases. For example, the term ‘picture’ was originally used for representational painting, but this has resulted in an extension in the use of the term, over a historical period, to apply to photographs, then to motion pictures, and even on to non-representational paintings. It seems to apply to quite distinct things, but gradual extensions of the term give sense to the application.

Understanding language with a historical dimension is part of understanding language as embedded in changes in human forms of life – ones that come with technological, artistic and cultural changes.

Third, implicit in our use of language is that it is guided by rules. When we say “this is a game” and “no, that isn’t a table”, we are expressing rules of use for the terms in our language. This is easily captured by the Platonist’s conception of language, the rules of use just *are* those conditions specified by the essence-capturing definition. Something *is* a chair when such-and-such conditions are satisfied – this specifies when it is right to use the term ‘chair’ and when it is not. But Wittgenstein denies that all concepts have these definitions, yet it would be entirely unintuitive, and potentially just obviously false, to deny that rules pervade our use of language. So how does Wittgenstein reconcile rules in language and his notion of family resemblance concepts?

In response, while it is plausible that rules pervade our language, and that Wittgenstein was committed to this thought, Wittgenstein is not committed to how ‘rules’ are to be understood. Rules should not be understood as *strict rules* (Forster, 2010). Wittgenstein says that there is a way of ‘grasping a rule which is not an *interpretation*’ (PI 201), or in other words, we needn’t specify the definition of the term, or explain how to use it, in order to have been said to have grasped the rule successfully. But we can ‘obey’ and ‘go against’ the rule, and in the case of FRCs this is simply applying it correctly and incorrectly to the items with the relevant family resemblances. This way of understanding rules is entirely consistent with FRCs, for there are not in these cases *strict rules* to grasp interpretatively. It also better coheres with our understanding of concepts as having historical and developing characters. The rules of use will change, as mentioned above, with various cultural changes, but these rules are really just determined by how we use the term in question; we do not keep a record of the specific rules of application, identified with strict definitions, such that we can identify correct and incorrect applications as cultural shifts remould conceptual extension – it is a much more casual affair.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that with the example games, and the introduction of family resemblance concepts, Wittgenstein aims to refute the Platonist picture of language. I first introduced the key features of the Platonist’s view, then showed that the existence of family resemblance concepts falsified the first feature. After this I considered resistance from the Platonist who unsuccessfully objected on the grounds that Wittgenstein’s view resulted in speakers being unaware of what they mean, concepts being inadequately employed, and an internal inconsistency with rule following and family resemblance concepts.

The upshot of Wittgenstein’s criticism is philosophically subversive. The Platonic conception of language has been highly influential, but his successful refutation of it and proposed alternative theory of language should lead us to redirect our inquiries. This should result in the dissolution of or change in direction of some philosophical

projects. For example, in cases like inquiries into the nature of what are likely family resemblance concepts, such as 'art' in aesthetics, or inquiries into the nature of propositions, where Wittgenstein points out that our everyday forms of expression where we talk about 'propositions' stand in our way (PI,93), our knowledge of them is limited by these forms of expression.