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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Family resemblance and the problem of universals: Bambrough's analysis revisited

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Abstract

In 'Universals and Family Resemblances', Renford Bambrough claims that Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of family resemblance solves the problem of universals. Bambrough's analysis has attracted a number of criticisms, including (i) that his exposition of the problem of universals is ill-conceived, (ii) that he overgeneralizes Wittgenstein's claims about family resemblance and (iii) that his reconstruction of Wittgensteinian family resemblance fails as a solution to the problem of universals. In this paper, I revisit Bambrough's account in light of these objections. I try to show that, despite its shortcomings, Bambrough presents a viable approach to the problem of universals that also seems to match Wittgenstein's original view—which is, quite surprisingly, committed to an essentialist framework of sorts and propagates a tacit form of knowledge of the subsumption principles of general terms.

I. | INTRODUCTION

In his influential 1960 paper, 'Universals and Family Resemblances',[1] Renford Bambrough claims that Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of family resemblance solves the problem of universals. Bambrough's analysis has attracted a number of criticisms, including (i) that his exposition of the problem of universals is ill-conceived, (ii) that he overgeneralizes Wittgenstein's claims about family resemblance and (iii) that his reconstruction of Wittgensteinian family resemblance

[1]Renford Bambrough, 'Universals and Family Resemblances', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61 (1960–1961): 207–222.

fails as a solution to the problem of universals.[2] While these criticisms are certainly justified in part, I think they go too far in their dismissal of Bambrough's account. For despite its various ambiguities and inaccuracies, it alludes, as I would like to show, to some neglected parts of Wittgenstein's mature theory of meaning which, properly understood, reveal its full radicality and ingenuity.

In what follows, I will examine Bambrough's theory of family resemblance in light of the aforementioned objections. In Section II, I contend that while Bambrough formulates the basic problem of universals quite adequately, he does not sufficiently separate its metaphysical and epistemological dimensions. In Section III, I argue that Bambrough indeed overstretches Wittgenstein's family resemblance analysis when he applies it to all concepts, even though *some* general conclusions about conceptual understanding can be drawn from it. Finally, in Section IV, I try to show that, despite all these flaws, Bambrough presents a viable approach to the problem of universals that also seems to match Wittgenstein's original intentions. Quite surprisingly, this approach is committed to an essentialist framework of sorts and propagates a tacit form of knowledge of the subsumption principles of general terms.

There is a caveat to my endeavour that I must mention first. Some commentators may think that the ambition to find a real solution to the problem of universals in Wittgenstein's writings on family resemblance is misguided from the start. For Wittgenstein, they argue, offered no views, theses or arguments at all, but pursued philosophy in a thoroughly therapeutic manner, aimed solely at curing philosophers of their urge to ask philosophical questions in the first place. I do not share this view and will ignore it for the purposes of this essay.[3] In other words, I will pretend that Wittgenstein has something substantive to say about the problem of universals (and apropos even speak loosely of a *theory* of meaning in mature Wittgenstein). The thesis of this essay can thus be taken conditionally: *If* the non-therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy is correct, its proponents should be prepared to ascribe to Wittgenstein much more sweeping epistemological and metaphysical commitments than previously assumed.

II. | THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

Bambrough presents the problem of universals as a problem concerning the subsumption principles of general terms.[4] This problem revolves around the question: Under what conditions do different individual things fall under

[2]Cf. Douglas Huff, 'Family Resemblances and Rule-Governed Behavior', *Philosophical Investigations* 4, no. 3 (1981): 1–23.

[3]For a critique of the purely therapeutic reading, cf. Annalisa Coliva, 'Doubts, Philosophy, and Therapy', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 45 (2021):155–177 and Hans-Johann Glock, *Normativity, Meaning and Philosophy: Essays on Wittgenstein* (Anthem Press, 2024).

[4]Cf. Bambrough, 'Universals and Family Resemblances', 217.

one and the same general term?[5] The classical positions in the universals controversy can then be characterized as contrary answers to this question: According to *realism* (or *essentialism*), different individual things fall under the same general term precisely when they all have a certain feature or set of features in common. According to *nominalism*, they do so on the basis of mere convention (or more generally: on the basis of intentional acts of grouping them together under certain aspects).[6] The problem with realism is that it is committed to the existence of mysterious universal entities—entities that can wholly and fully exist in different places at one and the same time. The problem with nominalism, on the contrary, is that in it the subsumption of individuals under general terms becomes entirely subjective and (thus) arbitrary.

Now, Bambrough maintains that the model of family resemblance that Wittgenstein develops in his later philosophy offers a way out of this dilemma. According to Bambrough's reconstruction of this model, individual things fall under a general term by virtue of an intricate network of overlapping and crisscrossing similarities, none of which, however, extend across all instances of the concept. Bambrough illustrates this with the following formal example[7]:

> 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 […]:

e	**d**	**c**	**b**	**a**
ABCD	*ABCE*	*ABDE*	*ACDE*	*BCDE*

According to Bambrough, the instances of general terms, such as game, are held together by just such a web of similarities. In this way, Bambrough argues, Wittgenstein escapes the problematic postulate of universals as well as the accusation of arbitrariness:

[5]This can be read both descriptively—as a question about the factors that *explain* the subsumption of different individuals under one term—and normatively—as a question about the criteria that *justify* this subsumption. However, these subtleties will be largely irrelevant to our discussion.

[6]Cf. Bambrough, 'Universals and Family Resemblances', 217–8.

[7]Cf. Bambrough, 'Universals and Family Resemblances', 209–10.

> Wittgenstein […] asserts at one and the same time the realist's claim that there is an objective justification for the application of the word "game" to games and the nominalist's claim that there is no element that is common to all games. And he is able to do all this because he denies the joint claim of the nominalist and the realist that there cannot be an objective justification for the application of the word "game" to games unless there is an element that is common to all games […].[8]

Some commentators have criticized Bambrough's exposition of the problem of universals as inadequate or even ill-conceived. I shall not consider here concerns that Bambrough misunderstands the problem of universals as negotiated by the medieval scholars.[9] In my view, Bambrough describes quite conveniently, if somewhat schematically, at least *one* problem of universals that philosophers have addressed. Above all, he describes the problem as Wittgenstein himself poses it:

> We are inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term "game" to the various games; whereas games form a *family* the members of which have family likenesses.[10]

A more interesting and instructive objection comes from Nammour,[11] who raises the question of how the universals controversy, as Bambrough puts it, could ever be decided in favour of one of the contending parties. If the issue between realists, nominalists and Wittgenstein is whether individual things fall under general terms because of common features, family resemblances or mere linguistic conventions, then the only way to settle this issue will be, it seems, to look at the world *apart from our language* and determine whether the things that fall under general terms actually have common features or family resemblances or not. But this, Nammour argues, is impossible: We can only ever 'look at' the world from our own cognitive perspective, which is to say, through the optics of our language. Thus, our view of reality is tinged (if not distorted), and things as they 'really' are forever shielded from our knowledge. This, he concludes, renders the dispute between realists,

[8]Cf. Bambrough, 'Universals and Family Resemblances', 218.

[9]For an expression of such concerns, cf. J. W. Thorp, 'Whether the Theory of Family Resemblances Solves the Problem of Universals', *Mind* 81, no. 324 (1972): 567–570.

[10]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the 'Philosophical Investigations'. Generally Known as The Blue and Brown Books* (hereafter known as BBB), 2nd ed. (Basil Blackwell, 1969), 17.

[11]Jamil Nammour, 'Resemblances and Universals', *Mind* 82, no. 328 (1973): 516–524.

nominalists and Wittgenstein undecidable in principle and the problem of universals itself barely intelligible:

> The Problem of Universals trades, it seems to me, on the metaphysical assumption that there is language on one side and the 'world' on the other side. Given this assumption, the question arises as to how general words in our language 'refer' to or 'designate' things in the 'world'. […] But […] it should be clear that this division will not do. It is impossible to divest ourselves from language and look at the 'world' or 'reality' independently of it and our variegated interests which are internally connected with it. It should be clear furthermore that the question of Universals which arises out of this division is also an impossible question. It demands the impossible for an answer—namely that we arrive at something nonlinguistic or extra-linguistic.[12]

I think Nammour's conclusion is overdrawn. In fact, I will try to show later that it can be refuted using Wittgenstein's own remarks. For now, I shall simply note that the operative idea in Nammour's argument, namely that our linguistic constructions effectively screen us cognitively off from the world follows from the alleged fact that all cognition is linguistically mediated only under the assumption of two further, more or less questionable premises: namely, that (i) any relation between our language and the world that would give us cognitive access to the latter could only be a relation that *we ourselves* would have to establish; but that (ii) we can never actually establish such a relation, since we cannot even get hold of what we are supposed to bring into relation with our language—the world—prior to the existence of that very relation. This line of thought, however, overlooks the possibility that our language might also be inherently connected to the world prior to and independent of any intervention on our part, and that we might therefore already be brought into cognitive contact with the world from the moment we acquired our language.[13]

Insofar, Nammour's claim that the problem of universals is undecidable or even unintelligible seems unwarranted. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, his objection draws attention to an important fact that Bambrough does not always seem to appreciate sufficiently in his analysis, namely, that the problem of universals has both a metaphysical and an epistemological dimension. Indeed, had Bambrough paid more attention to this fact, he could have noticed that Wittgenstein's own discussion of family resemblance addresses primarily epistemological, rather than metaphysical, questions

[12]Nammour, 'Resemblances and Universals', 523.

[13]Cf. H. O. Mounce, 'Wittgenstein and Classical Realism', in *Readings of Wittgenstein's On Certainty*, ed. Danièle Moyal-Sharrock and William H. Brenner (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 105.

about the subsumption principles of general terms.[14] Wittgenstein is not, or not directly, concerned with the question of what the conditions *are* by virtue of which individual things fall under general terms, but rather with the question of how, if at all, linguistic agents are able to *recognize* these conditions (whatever they are) and thus come to *understand* the meaning of a general term. Admittedly, in the central Paragraphs 66 and 67 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein unfolds his conception of family resemblance, this is obscured by some formulations that may give the impression that he is actually dealing with the question of the existence of universal essences and properties:

> Consider for example the proceedings that we call "games". […] 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.[15]

However, these and similar formulations are flanked by statements that, in my opinion, clearly reveal the epistemological thrust of Wittgenstein's deliberations. First, he prefaces the passages quoted above with a paragraph in which he considers the challenge that one should be able to *say* what is essential to a phenomenon and to *specify* what is common to all instances of a concept.[16] And in the sections following Paragraphs 66 and 67, he discusses almost exclusively questions about the necessity of *knowing* and *articulating* a classical definition for the ability to understand a general term and use it correctly. Thus, he asks:

> What does it mean to know what a game is? What does it mean, to know it and not be able to say it? Is this knowledge somehow equivalent to an unformulated definition? So that if it were formulated I should be able to recognize it as the expression of my knowledge? Isn't my knowledge, my concept of a game, completely expressed in the explanations that I could give?[17]

This suggests a point that I would like to bring out more fully in the following sections: namely, that Wittgenstein is less concerned with solving the metaphysical

[14]Cf. Sorin Bangu, 'Later Wittgenstein on Essentialism, Family Resemblance and Philosophical Method', *Metaphysica* 6, no. 2 (2005), 53–73 and Roger Pouivet, 'Wittgenstein's Essentialism', in *Liber Amicorum Pascal Engel*, ed. Julien Dutant, Davide Fassio, Anne Meylan (Université de Genève, 2014), 449–464.

[15]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* / *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (hereafter known as PI), ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Wiley, 2009), § 66.

[16]Cf. PI, § 65.

[17]PI, § 75; cf. §§ 69–70.

problem of universals than with solving a related epistemological problem—one that incidentally led Nammour to his criticism of Bambrough. This is not to say that Wittgenstein is not at all interested in metaphysical questions concerning the subsumption principles of general terms, or that no conclusions regarding these issues can be drawn from his epistemological arguments. As we shall see, Wittgenstein's reflections on family resemblance and on how speakers come to know the conditions of application of general terms actually push him towards a position regarding the existence of universals that is even more radical than the classical alternatives in the debate (and the view that is commonly attributed to Wittgenstein). Before we get there, however, I would like to examine another interpretive issue.

III. | THE SCOPE OF WITTGENSTEIN'S FAMILY RESEMBLANCE CONCEPTION

Bambrough claims that the problem of universals can be solved with Wittgenstein's conception of family resemblance alone. Many commentators have questioned this.[18] For even if the family resemblance model could avoid the dilemma of realism and nominalism, the problem of universals would only be completely solved if the model could be applied to all general terms. But, *pace* Bambrough, the critics argue, this is not the case. So, if anything, family resemblance might only partially solve the problem.

Wittgenstein's own statements on the matter seem to play into the hands of the critics. He himself obviously does not think that all general terms can be analysed as family resemblance terms. On the contrary, Wittgenstein seems to admit that many concepts—not least the various sub-concepts of a family resemblance concept—are defined by necessary and/or sufficient conditions[19]:

> We count as numbers cardinal numbers, rational numbers, irrational numbers, complex numbers; whether we call other constructions numbers because of their similarities with these, or draw a definitive boundary here or elsewhere, depends on us. […] On the other hand the concept of cardinal number [1, ξ, ξ + 1] can be called a rigorously circumscribed concept, that's to say it's a concept in a different sense of the word.[20]

[18]Cf. Hans Sluga, 'Family Resemblance', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71, no. 1 (2006): 1–21.

[19]Cf. Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Blackwell, 1996), 123.

[20]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar* (hereafter known as PG), ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny (Basil Blackwell, 1974), § 70.

Now, Bambrough's position on the question of the scope of Wittgenstein's family resemblance conception is not entirely clear. Like Wittgenstein, Bambrough acknowledges the existence of classically defined terms. However, he believes that these are not really opposed to family resemblance terms, but on the contrary can ultimately also be subjected to a family resemblance analysis. For this, he gives several reasons. In one place, Bambrough writes:

> Even if the actual instances [of a concept] were indefinitely numerous, and they all happened to have one or more of the features in common, it would not be in virtue of the presence of the common feature or features that they would all be rightly called by the same name, since the name also applies to *possible* instances that lack the feature or features.[21]

Bambrough here takes up the idea that it is always possible to apply a family resemblance term to novel cases that lack features that all previous applications of the concept may have in common. Thus, if such a term *appears* to have a classical definition (because its application has not *yet* been extended to novel cases), then this definition can only represent a 'snippet' or 'snapshot' of its usage—and a rather random one at that—which can never capture the term's full range of application.

Now, the possibility of applying a term to cases that have no feature in common with all its previous applications is indeed the hallmark of family resemblance terms. Yet, Bambrough seems to commit a *petitio* when he assumes that *all* general terms permit such an extension of application. Moreover, this assumption is highly contentious. It may surely happen that a classically defined term receives an extension of meaning in the course of its use and thus becomes applicable to cases that no longer satisfy all of the originally defining conditions of the term. (Although the question remains as to whether the term is still used in the same sense in this case, or rather, as in the case of a metaphorical transfer, undergoes a change in meaning.) However, a term, such as 'brother', for example, might well continue to apply only to male siblings in all future or possible circumstances.

But Bambrough offers another argument for the universal scope of the family resemblance model:

> Even a concept which can be explained in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions cannot be *ultimately* explained in such terms. To satisfy the craving for an ultimate explanation of "brother" in

[21]Bambrough, 'Universals and Family Resemblances', 210.

> such terms it would be necessary to define "male" and "sibling", and the words in which "male" and "sibling" were defined, and so on *ad infinitum* and *ad impossibile*.[22]

Unlike the one above, this argument does not have to assume that the classical concept of brother can in principle be applied to anything other than male siblings (and thus has always actually been a family resemblance concept). Nonetheless, the present argument seeks to show that even classical definitions, such as that of 'brother', must always remain incomplete in an important sense, as they can never fully *specify* what the defined concepts apply to and where the limits of their application lie.

There are two things to be said about this argument: First, the argument fails to show what it purports to show, namely that classically defined terms are, in the last instance, also 'only' family resemblance terms. This is because even infinitely regressive definitions still clearly delineate the boundaries of application of the terms they define. Even if the definition of a term like 'brother' affords an endless chain of specifications, it does not follow that 'brother' can ever be applied to anything other than male siblings. After all, the term's defining conditions are not invalidated by their ever more detailed specification. The incompleteness of classical definitions that Bambrough highlights here is not one that opens up the possibility of extending a term's application in the way that is characteristic of family resemblance terms.

Second, Bambrough's point about an infinite regress of explanations introduces a line of thought that does not flow straight from the idea of family resemblance. Rather, it presents a reasoning that prefigures Wittgenstein's later considerations on rule-following. Just as Bambrough argues here that a definition can never fully explain the meaning of a term, because it itself consists of terms, the meanings of which would have to be explained by further definitions (etc.), Wittgenstein argues in the paragraphs devoted to the rule-following paradox (roughly, §§ 138–242 of the *Philosophical Investigations*) that the interpretation of a rule can never fully determine the proper application of that rule, since it is itself nothing but a rule, the application of which would have to be determined by further interpretations (etc.).

However, Bambrough must be forgiven to some extent for mixing the two lines of argument. This is because Wittgenstein himself occasionally moves almost imperceptibly from considerations of family resemblance to ones of rule-following:

> One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way.—I do not, however, mean by this that he is supposed to see in those examples that common thing which I—for some reason—was unable to express; but that he is now to *employ* those examples

[22]Bambrough, 'Universals and Family Resemblances', 214.

> in a particular way. Here giving examples is not an *indirect* means of explaining—in default of a better. For any general definition can be misunderstood too.[23]

Such passages suggest that Wittgenstein definitely sees his family resemblance conception and rule-following considerations, although they pursue clearly different ideas, as working in tandem. Contrary to what Bambrough seems to believe, however, Wittgenstein is not trying to use them for a proof that there are no classically defined concepts. What he rather wants to demonstrate is that a possible knowledge of classical definitions plays no role whatsoever in the understanding and correct use of general terms. In this respect, the observation that speakers understand and competently use family resemblance terms whose instances share no common feature is meant to show that knowledge of classical definitions is not in every case *necessary* for the understanding and correct use of general terms; the paradox that conceptual rules (such as definitions) never determine the correct application of a concept (since they, too, can be misunderstood), on the contrary, is supposed to show that knowledge of classical definitions, even where speakers have it, is not *sufficient* to understand and correctly use a general term. Together, both arguments are intended to establish that a linguistic agent's proper understanding and use of a general term is *entirely independent* of any explicit knowledge of a conceptual rule and classical definition, respectively.

One can therefore agree with the critics that Bambrough fails to show that the family resemblance model is applicable to all general terms. At the same time, he is right that Wittgenstein sees no significant difference between classically defined concepts and family resemblance concepts. The mistake that Bambrough makes is once again that he confuses metaphysical and epistemological levels of the problem of universals. Wittgenstein does accept that there are classically defined terms alongside family resemblance terms—metaphysically speaking: terms whose instances are united by common features rather than by interlocking similarities. He denies, however, that a knowledge of common features produces or is required for the production of a semantic understanding of general terms, be they classically defined or not. It is in this epistemological respect, then, that Wittgenstein assimilates classical concepts and family resemblance concepts.

[23]PI, § 71; cf. PI, §§ 84–86.

IV. | BAMBROUGH'S SOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

The most serious objection to Bambrough is that his construction of family resemblance does not solve the problem of universals at all because, contrary to Bambrough's own assertion, it cannot satisfactorily explain the regular, that is non-arbitrary application of general terms. In the literature, this is also known as the problem of wide-open texture.[24] On the one hand, the objection goes, not every shared characteristic makes an object a member of a conceptual family. For example, real money is used in both stock transactions and poker (which distinguishes them from a game like Monopoly), but that does not make stock transactions a game.[25] On the other hand, membership in a conceptual family cannot depend on the mere quantity of commonalities; Wittgenstein's conception of family resemblance even allows for the possibility that a thing has only one commonality with only one member of a conceptual family (and not a single one with all the others) and yet is unquestionably a full member of that family. Hence, the question arises why some similarities are relevant to make something a member of a conceptual family and others are not.

Now, this criticism would be valid if Bambrough's solution to the problem of universals were indeed based only on overlapping, crisscrossing similarities. In fact, however, Bambrough claims more. In his view, the crucial condition for individual things to fall under a general term is ultimately that they are of precisely the kind that is expressed by that very term:

> [O]f course games *do* have something in common. They *must* have something in common, and yet when we look for what they have in common we cannot find it. When we try to say what they have in common we always fail. And this is not because what we are looking for lies deeply hidden, but because it is too obvious to be seen […]. The simple truth is that what games have in common is that they are games.[26]

What is striking here is that in his final approach to solving the problem of universals, Bambrough does not even speak of interlocking similarities. In his view, the various instances of the concept 'game', for example, simply have in common that they *are* games. Bambrough is keen to distinguish this proposition from that of the nominalist, according to whom the various instances of 'game' merely have in common that they are *called* 'games'. But

[24]Robert J. Richman, 'Something Common', *The Journal of Philosophy* 59, no. 26 (1962): 821–30.

[25]Cf. Huff, 'Family Resemblances and Rule-Governed Behavior', 7.

[26]Bambrough, 'Universals and Family Resemblances', 216.

Bambrough also wants to distinguish himself from the classical realist, according to whom the various instances of 'game' have something more fundamental in common than merely being games: namely, a set of properties *by virtue of which* they are games.[27]

To be sure, commentators who have taken note of this peculiar turn in Bambrough's proposal have not been particularly convinced by it. The following assessment may be quite representative:

> A simple truth, yes, but also a profoundly unhelpful one, and one which can scarcely provide an adequate solution to the problem of universals. […] It seems to me that Bambrough is raising being a game into some sort of inscrutable, metaphysical entity which activities either are or are not. If this is the case […] then Bambrough's is either a particularly obscure or a particularly trivial form of essentialism.[28]

Contrary to the critics, however, Bambrough's solution to the problem of universals can indeed be drawn from and elucidated by Wittgenstein's own remarks on family resemblances. The first thing to note in this context is that Wittgenstein actually holds that a family resemblance between two objects, when recognized, is recognized independently of any knowledge of common features of these objects: 'Anyone with an eye for family resemblances can recognize that two people are related to each other, even without being able to say wherein the resemblance lies'.[29] This sometimes goes so far that a resemblance is even perceived between objects that differ greatly in their nameable attributes: '"They're brother and sister, but they don't look alike at all."—"I can see a similarity between them."'[30] Conversely, it is also possible that a similarity of two objects fails to be recognized even when their commonalities are perfectly known, which becomes particularly apparent in the phenomenon of what Wittgenstein calls the 'noticing of an aspect'[31]: 'The

[27]Ibid., 215.

[28]Nicholas Griffin, 'Wittgenstein, Universals and Family Resemblances', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 4 (1974), 641–2.

[29]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology: Volume II*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue. (Basil Blackwell, 1980), § 551.

[30]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology: Volume I*, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue (Basil Blackwell, 1982), § 160. To this also fits the observation that linguistic agents are often and without further ado able to subsume things under the same family resemblance term that have hardly any properties in common (such as card games and the activity of a child throwing a ball against a wall and catching it again).

[31]Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment' (hereafter known as PPF), in *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Wiley, 2009), § 113.

one man might make an accurate drawing of the two faces, and the other notice in the drawing the likeness which the former did not see'.[32]

Wittgenstein explains these phenomena by suggesting that the resemblance that is (or is not) recognized in such cases is an *elementary internal similarity* between the objects under consideration. That a similarity between a number of objects is an *internal* one means that it supervenes on the essences or 'inner' natures of the objects involved (and not on accidental 'external' circumstances): 'a relation which holds, if the terms are what they are'.[33] That the similarity is *elementary* means that it is not logically constructed out of the internal similarities that exist between the various (essential) *properties* of these objects—or, equivalently, that the objects' essences on which the similarity supervenes are not logical constructions out of these properties. According to Wittgenstein, the paradigm of such elementary internal similarities are the primitive kinships between the different colours:

> A mixed colour, or better, a colour intermediate between blue and red is such in virtue of an internal relation to the structures of blue and red. But this internal relation is *elementary*. That is, it doesn't consist in the proposition '*a* is blue-red' representing a logical product of '*a* is blue' and '*a* is red'.[34]

Wittgenstein suggests that the members of other conceptual families resemble each other in an equally elementary-internal manner. Thus, he explicitly likens the similarity of the different experiences of physical and mental strain to the elementary internal similarity of different shades of colour:

> There is something remarkable about saying that we use the word "strain" for both mental and physical strain because there is a similarity between them. […] If you were asked "Why do you call this 'blue' also?", you would say "Because this is blue, too".
>
> One might suggest that the explanation is that in this case you call "blue" what is *in common* between the two colours, and that, if you called "strain" what was in common between the two experiences of strain, […] you would have had to say "I used the word 'strain' in both cases because there is a strain present in both".

[32]PPF, § 112.

[33]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures, Cambridge 1930–1933. From the Notes of G. E. Moore*, ed. David G. Stern, Brian Rogers and Gabriel Citron (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 5:85.

[34]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Remarks* (hereafter known as PR), ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White (Basil Blackwell, 1975), § 80.

> Now what should we answer to the question […] "What do these colours I am pointing to have in common?" (Suppose one is light blue, the other dark blue.) The answer to this really ought to be "I don't know what game you are playing". […]
>
> To say that we use the word "blue" to mean 'what all these shades of colour have in common' by itself says nothing more than that we use the word "blue" in all these cases.[35]

Just as between the different shades of blue, Wittgenstein believes, there is only an *elementary* internal similarity between the different experiences of physical and mental strain and none that can be reduced to anything like shared features.

> 'Why do you call "strain" all these different experiences?'—'Because they have some element in common.'—'What is it that bodily and mental strain have in common?'—'I don't know, but obviously there is some similarity.'
>
> Then […] when you said that the two experiences of strain had something in common, these were only different words for saying that they were similar. It was then no explanation to say that the similarity consisted in the occurrence of a common element.[36]

It might be objected at this point, however, that the model of colour terms with its notion of 'elementary affinity'[37] cannot be applied to all general terms—let alone all family resemblance terms. After all, not all general terms are simple or basic to the effect that the resemblance between their instances could not be analysed further, for example in terms of more specific commonalities, similarities or other feature correspondences. And is it not precisely the point of Wittgenstein's family resemblance model that the similarities between instances of such terms are founded on (partial) agreements in specific attributes?

And yet Wittgenstein seems to be of the opinion that even in these cases, the resemblance on the basis of which different individuals fall under a general term is an elementary relation. Using another example of aspect perception, in which a person notices the similarity of a perceived object to an object in their imagination, he explains:

[35]BBB, 133–5.
[36]BBB, 132.
[37]PR, § 76.

> The colour in the visual impression corresponds to the colour of the object […]—the shape in the visual impression to the shape of the object […]—but what I perceive in the lighting up of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects.[38]

In this passage, Wittgenstein repeats the idea of a resemblance between objects that exists solely by virtue of the specific essences of those objects. Moreover, he now seems to imply that these essences (and thus the objects' resemblance to one another) are not determined by the respective properties of the objects.

Clearly, the essence of an object is not determined by its *accidental* properties. Therefore, for example, the colour of a rabbit picture will contribute nothing to its internal similarity to a rabbit. But even if the properties of an object are *essential* to it—just as it may be essential to a face that it has eyes—Wittgenstein thinks it is not these properties that determine the object's essence. For, as he suggests, the identities of these properties themselves are not fixed independently of the very essence of the object: 'I point to a particular spot in the picture and say "That is the eye of the rabbit or of the duck." Now how can something in this drawing be an *eye*?'[39] An eye is an eye only within the context of a face. Accordingly, one will only be able to recognize the similarity of a spot in a drawing with an eye if one has already recognized the resemblance of the whole picture with a face.[40]

Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception is not explicitly linked to his analysis of family resemblance. However, there are a number of connections that make the former relevant to the latter. First, for Wittgenstein, aspect perception essentially consists in the perception of similarities between (real or imagined) objects.[41] Indeed, Wittgenstein's very first example of an aspect in PPF, xi—the *locus classicus* of his discussion of aspect perception—is at the same time a paradigm of family resemblance, namely, the likeness of two faces.[42] Second, this perception of similarities underlies the so-called secondary use of terms, that is the application of words to things outside their originally intended domain of application (as, e.g., the application of colour terms to sounds).[43] Third, Wittgenstein argues that there is no categorical difference between the secondary and primary use of a concept, that is between a

[38]PPF, § 247.

[39]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I* (hereafter known as RPP I), ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Basil Blackwell, 1980), § 84. Cf. PPF, § 142.

[40]Cf. Avner Baz, *Wittgenstein on Aspect Perception* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 21.

[41]Cf. RPP I, § 317.

[42]Cf. PPF, § 111.

[43]Cf. BBB, 138–9; PPF, §§ 274–8.

reapplication in which the term changes its meaning (e.g. as in the case of metaphors) and one in which the term's meaning stays the same (as in the case of family resemblance terms).[44] Actually, he even describes the progressively extended use of family resemblance terms just like an iterated secondary use of terms to describe perceived aspects (resemblances) of objects:

> It may be said: the friendly eyes, the friendly mouth, the wagging of a dog's tail, are among the primary and mutually independent symbols of friendliness; I mean: They are parts of the phenomena that are called friendliness. If one wants to imagine further appearances as expressions of friendliness, one reads these symbols into them. […] If I were asked whether I could imagine a chair with a friendly expression, it would be above all a friendly *facial expression* I would want to imagine it with; I would want to read a friendly *face* into it.[45]

Taken together, these considerations suggest, first, that Wittgenstein takes the essences of things in general to be prior to their—accidental *and* essential—properties and thus to be ultimately as simple and basic as the essences of colours. Secondly, they suggest that he regards the internal similarities not only among colours, but also among the instances of family resemblance terms, and presumably even among those of all general terms, as elementary. Plausibly, what he says about colours:

> The very proposition that talks about an internal relationship between the structures [of blue and red] originates in an incorrect idea—in *that* idea that sees complicated structures in the concepts "red", "blue", etc., structures whose inner construction must be shown by analysis.[46]

can therefore be generalized to all concepts.

Wittgenstein's remarks on essences and essential resemblances have significant and rarely acknowledged consequences for the epistemology and metaphysics of the subsumption principles of general terms. A first consequence is that, contrary to standard explications of Wittgenstein's family resemblance conception,[47] knowledge of complex family resemblance analyses is as irrelevant to the understanding and correct use of general terms as

[44]Cf. BBB, 139–40.

[45]PG, § 129.

[46]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Big Typescript: TS 213*, ed. and trans. C. Grant Luckhardt and Maximilian A. E. Aue. (Blackwell, 2005), 342e.

[47]For example, Keith Campbell, 'Family Resemblance Predicates', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1965), 238–244.

knowledge of classical definitions. To apply general terms correctly to their instances, linguistic agents do *neither* need to know common features of these instances *nor* do they need to know about interlocking similarities between them. What they need to recognize instead are the elementary internal similarities between certain objects, which these objects have not because of global or local attribute agreements but because of what they fundamentally are.

Secondly, however, what must be known in order to understand and correctly use general terms—the elementary internal similarity of objects—can only be known tacitly, that is not in any conceptually articulated or articulable way. For Wittgenstein's notion of elementary, internal similarity also has the consequence that such a similarity cannot be *described* in terms of common characteristics of the resembling objects (as in 'A is like B in that both are FGH…'): 'If someone said: "I do see a certain similarity, only I can't describe it", I should say: "This itself characterizes your experience".'[48] Accordingly, the application of the same general term to different internally similar objects cannot be *justified* by recourse to common characteristics either (as in 'A and B may be called "X" because they are both FGH…'):

> Now to the question "What made you use the word 'darker' [in relation to vowels]?" the answer may be "Nothing made me use the word 'darker',—that is, if you ask me for a *reason* why I use it. I just used it, and what is more, I used it with the same intonation of voice, and perhaps with the same facial expression and gesture, which I should in certain cases be inclined to use when applying the word to colours".[49]

What Wittgenstein is getting at here is that the knowledge on which the understanding and correct use of general terms is based is not an intellectual knowledge—one that already presupposes an understanding of language and licences inferences in favour of certain word uses—but rather a practical know-how that makes the understanding of language possible in the first place and may manifest itself in nothing other than the competent use of the relevant terms.

> One might be inclined to say "Surely a similarity must strike us, or we shouldn't be moved to use the same word". But why shouldn't what we call "the similarity striking us" consist partially or wholly in our […] being prompted to use the same phrase?[50]

[48]BBB, 136.
[49]BBB, 136–7.
[50]BBB, 130.

To be sure, this is *not* to say that the use of general terms is arbitrary. For a third notable implication of Wittgenstein's idea of an internal similarity of things is that such a similarity cannot be the construct of subjective experiences or attitudes: these would be external to the things concerned and therefore could not establish an *internal* similarity between them: 'I see cowardice in this face (and might see it in another too) but at all events it doesn't seem to be merely associated, outwardly connected, with the face'[51] Wittgenstein evidently thinks that it is *objective* essences and similarities which linguistic agents become acquainted with in the process of learning the meaning of general terms:

> It seems you can find out something about the nature of a thing by experience. About its internal nature. Thus e.g. a similarity can strike you; […] this experience […] seems to teach you a […] truth & this does not seem to be a rule of grammar but a truth about the nature of things.[52]

Against this background, Bambrough's enigmatic statements on the essence of games become a good deal more intelligible and plausible. Bambrough is quite right that, for Wittgenstein, games do have something in common by virtue of which they fall under the term 'game'. Moreover, his assertion that what they have in common is their being games is only seemingly circular, but is simply due to the fact that, according to Wittgenstein, the essence of games can, strictly speaking, not be explicated (by means of classical definitions or more complex family resemblance analyses) and can only be given linguistic expression through the very application of the term 'game' and its cognates to the various games. Thus, calling what all games have in common their being games (or their playfulness etc.) is effectively the only linguistic way to articulate their otherwise ineffable internal similarity to each other. What we have here is quite simply a case of the philosopher reaching the 'limit of language', manifested 'in the impossibility of describing the fact that corresponds to […] a sentence without simply repeating the sentence'.[53]

This also clarifies what exactly Bambrough's solution to the problem of wide-open texture is (or should be). Contrary to the critics, family resemblance *is* sufficient to limit the extension of general terms, for it consists in an elementary internal similarity between things that does *not* arise from

[51]PG, § 128.

[52]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Bergen Nachlass Edition* (Wittgenstein Archives at the University of Bergen, 2015), Ms-148, 20–22.

[53]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value. A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, ed. G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, rev. ed. of the text Alois Pichler, trans. Peter Winch, rev. 2nd ed. (Blackwell, 1998), 13.

overlapping and crisscrossing correspondences of features (which basically exist between *all* things), but from a fundamental correspondence of essence (which thus exists only between the members of certain kinds). Hence, poker and Monopoly—unlike stock transactions—fall under the term 'game' because they have what cannot be described other than as a playful nature (which stock transactions lack). That real money is used in both stock transactions and poker games is only apparently a commonality between the two; for only in poker (and other gambling games) is money used in a *playful* manner. In *this* sense, Gert's statement applies: 'members of a […] 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'.[54]

V. | CONCLUSION

Let me summarize the results so far. I have reviewed and reassessed Bambrough's reconstruction of Wittgenstein's family resemblance conception as an approach to the problem of universals in the light of some of its most common criticisms. The discussion has shown that Bambrough misrepresents Wittgenstein's position in many details. Thus, he sometimes confuses epistemological and metaphysical levels of analysis and also overestimates the scope of the family resemblance model, respectively, its role in Wittgenstein's overarching theoretical agenda. Nevertheless, Bambrough's reconstruction seems, consciously or unconsciously, to capture Wittgenstein's actual account of the subsumption principles of general terms—which in several respects turns out to be quite different from what is usually assumed.

The most surprising finding is probably that, contrary to popular belief, Wittgenstein's conception of family resemblance by no means refutes or contradicts essentialism. Indeed, the essentialism implicit in his conception is even more radical than that of classical realism, since the essences and internal similarities of objects that underlie the understanding and use of general terms cannot, according to Wittgenstein, be analysed in terms of sets of universal properties, but have to be taken as primitives. As a matter of fact, such a view has a precursor in Aristotle's theory of kinds; it would be a worthwhile task for another occasion to explore the thematic (if not historical) connections between the two approaches. Meanwhile, of course, it must also be said that by postulating a further type of universals, Wittgenstein does not solve the *metaphysical*

[54]Heather J. Gert, 'Family Resemblances and Criteria', *Synthese* 105, no. 2 (1995): 183. However, it is important to understand the dependence of family resemblance on family membership correctly: The different members of a conceptual family are not *genetically* related (as Gert thinks), but *generically*; their resemblances are not *caused* but *constituted* by the family-making kind to which they all belong.

problem of universals (which, in the view of the opponents, arises from the very postulate of universals), but at best denies it.

Another insight gained from the examination of Wittgenstein's conception, however, brings us back to the *epistemological problem* of universals, or more precisely to Nammour's argument that we can never know anything about putative subsumption principles of general terms because such principles necessarily elude our conceptual grasp. As we have seen, the fact that elementary internal similarities cannot be described in conventional terms does not mean for Wittgenstein that linguistic agents have no cognitive access to them at all. On the contrary, the whole point of his remarks on family resemblance seems to be that competent speakers have (and must have) a *tacit knowledge* of such similarities that is entirely practically realized and involves a direct acquaintance with the essences of objects. Again, more would need to be said about the precise nature of this knowledge, which Wittgenstein also calls 'familiarity'[55] or 'intransitive understanding',[56] and which bears certain parallels to the concept of being-in-the-world in the philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In any case, it seems to be with some such notion that Wittgenstein wants to provide an answer to the question of how to recognize the conditions by virtue of which individual things fall under general terms—which for him is nothing other than the key question of his entire theory of meaning: what it is to understand a language.[57]

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[55]PG, § 37; BBB, 127, 180–2; PI, § 596; RPP I, §§ 120–3.

[56]PG, § 37.

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