

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*
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Lecture VII: §§65-88 (continuation)

We have been discussing family resemblances: what this notion (and the other considerations) are meant to do and what they are aimed against. We distinguished three steps, or increasingly subtle aims, of Wittgenstein's.

The First Blush: For some concepts there are no necessary and sufficient conditions of application. Part of the force of that is that concepts like “game” are not in any way primitive. So “game” is different from concepts like “red.” But it is perhaps surprising that complex concepts admit of characterization in no simpler terms. Call this the “anti-Socratic” move. This move goes against many philosophical programs (Leibniz, Hume, Carnap, Dummett, etc.) But Wittgenstein wants to accomplish more.

The Second Blush: at stake is a notion of a universal that *underlies* our application of a general term, something that *explains* the use of the word. The universal is supposed to justify ascriptions and denials — it is that which makes us use the same word in a new case. Now if complex concepts lack necessary and sufficient conditions — concepts connected in multifarious ways to many other concepts, what we are meant to see is that grasping a *single* (yet undefinable) *thing* does not give us any hint of what is really involved in understanding the concept. The model is explanatorily poor. That is, Wittgenstein is exploiting the tension between the simplicity of the model and the variegation in individual cases of ascription. The lack of necessary and sufficient conditions for “red” does not militate against hypostatizing a universal of redness. But to hypostatize a universal for “game” or “shoe” or “language” looks much more questionable. As a model of *knowledge*, talk of grasping universals seems overly simple in contrast to our practices. The model of universals fits our ascriptive practices badly. (This aim, e.g., fits in well with the use of family resemblances as a way of thinking about cognitive terms like “understanding”, “intending”, and “meaning”. The idea is that different cases of understanding need not share a property; and then that there is no reason to hypostatize a single thing that is the understanding. Cf. §36.)

But this does not reach far enough; it fails fully to reflect what Wittgenstein is doing.

For it leaves untouched the basic thrust of the push towards universals — the reasons that we might suppose that *something* must underlie the use of a general term. We could accept the second-blush criticism but still retain the core idea of universals by making our model more *complicated*. Grasping a general term is not a single feat, but rather a complex one, involving all sorts of explicit and tacit knowledge, as well as practical skills. This move retains the idea that there is *something* there all at the start, underlying the general term, that informs each application of it.. This level underneath guides the projection of the word and explains how to go on. It is the idea of *fixity* of meaning.

The Third Blush: Wittgenstein aims to undercut the whole idea of fixity of meaning. Evidence for this broadening of the aim is that Wittgenstein talks of color words in these sections, and these are not family concepts. Also in §79 Wittgenstein talks of proper names, not general terms. So obviously something more is afoot than is given in the first two blushes.

How does Wittgenstein try to turn these ideas aside? In these sections he is diagnosing our tendency to see our various practices with language as always pointing beyond themselves, indicating the necessity of a deeper level. Wittgenstein wants us to see that the temptation is philosophically loaded. This deeper level does not match up with what seems to lead us there (e.g. see §79). These sections can be read as pointing to a slippage between our practices and what is taken philosophically to underlie them. But when we look at actual cases, we see a move being built in at the start.

In all of this, family resemblances seem to play only a supporting role. So you can see the appeal to family resemblances as just one part of a multi-faceted attack on fixity of meaning. Family resemblances enter at points to remind us that our philosophical diagnoses don't square well with the facts.

One of the major themes here is that of the *boundaries* of our concepts. That makes it clear that the issue is the *fixed content* of an ascription of a general term. The Interlocutor's worry is that the denial of sharp boundaries leads to *unregulatedness*, where no justification for ascriptions is possible if what I could say *now* to justify my ascription differs from what I might say *later*. (See §68.) The philosophical claim is that something must underlie our use of the general term, knowledge of which

constitutes understanding the term, and which supplies fixity of meaning.

Two sorts of considerations arise here, which Wittgenstein plays upon; they are interwoven in the text. First, what features of what we do in our operation with words are indicators of something lying behind our words? Our actual use of words, according to the philosopher, is gesturing at something deeper. What is this “gesturing?” Second, how does this deeper level *help* us? What does it do for us? How does it operate? These are questions about the way *into*, and the way *out from*, the underlying level. (Both are considered in the early §§70s.)

Concerning the first issue: our explanations of new ascriptions look, on this philosophical proto-picture, as though they point to something, but never quite get there. For instance, with “game”, there is no such thing as a *full* explanation. Our verbiage is just an effort *faute de mieux*. So explanations are indirect: “the common thing that I, for some reason, was unable to express” (§71). This holds for the distinction between particular cases and the underlying level.

Wittgenstein considers ways that we get to the underlying level. In §72, he considers “seeing what the instances have in common,” and he takes the best case of a term for which that makes sense, namely color terms. (These are not family resemblance terms.) Wittgenstein's point is that that locution is misconstrued when taken as bespeaking a fixed entity licensing our ascriptions. In his remarks, there is a resemblance to his remarks on ostensive definition in the §§30s: how a definition is to be taken, what sets it up, its surroundings. The common “thing” cannot be characterized independently of the rest of our practices. Wittgenstein wants to point away from the fixed item towards the role of practices. We see an analogous move in the early sections: the motif is that “seeing what the instances have in common” does not function independently of all of our other practices-so it cannot be seen as pointing to an underlying explanatory level.

In §75 Wittgenstein wants to show the kind of unwarranted cast the philosophical idea of fixity puts on the *knowledge* of the meanings of these terms. This construal of “knowing what a game is” fuels the idea that explanations of meaning are proxies pointing beyond themselves. In §75 Wittgenstein wants to make the whole idea here look fishy. Why should we think that there is a *problem* here? An apparent problem arises only when a certain sort of “it” is being sought. “Isn't my knowledge

completely expressed in the explanations I would give?” Wittgenstein really means “*completely* expressed.” If we take our explanations completely to express our concept of “game,” then there is a reliance on *us* and *our practices*. Only given facts about us will our explanations convey our knowledge of meaning: because only given them can we rely on those explanations being taken up in the correct way. The desire for fixity of meaning, on the other hand, stems from a desire for something to give us a *logical* assurance without relying upon facts about us.

In §78 there is a response to dissatisfactions with that idea. Wittgenstein makes a very brief response: “Compare *knowing* and *saying*: how many feet high Mont Blanc is-how the word 'game' is used-how a clarinet sounds”. If you know what “game” means, then there is some *thing* that you know. And this can appear to give us a “*what*” to know. Now Wittgenstein means, against this, to highlight the diversity and variegation, in what we think of as knowledge, and its various relations to verbal explanation. All this is part of his illustrating that our practices do not point to an underlying level.

In the converse direction, we have the question of what the underlying level yields — how we get from it to what we do with the general term. Wittgenstein wants to exhibit the lack of explanatory power of postulating the underlying level. See §§73-4, where Wittgenstein brings up the idea of a sample. What makes an item a sample of some *one* property rather than another? To take the sample correctly, one must know how it is to be used.

What is Wittgenstein getting at? He isn't saying that samples cannot work; he is trying to show that samples' powers to be samples depends on their positions in our practices. This is to say that there is no absolute notion of determination. How does that work? In order for what is supposed to be operating behind the general term to determine its application, we must know how that item is to be taken. This is a matter of practices, of surroundings. But the whole idea of the underlying level is meant to *explain* the practices. So our model of determination fails to fit what we actually *see* of the way that a sample's representative capacities are determined. It comes from a misconstrual of how samples operate that we get this model at all.

Reflecting on samples, we might say that the legitimacy of application of a given sample can be open to question in particular cases. The moral is that, even given the

underlying level, the application in individual cases would be open to question. Something will need to be added — some further explanation. In that case, the underlying level is not the completely determining factor we thought it to be. Whatever we say in justifying the application of the level would be sufficient to justify how we go on with the word.

This is simply an application of Aristotle's "Third Man" argument against Plato. Wittgenstein's version of it is a reflection on those cases that look most like that kind of guidance in the real world, e.g., color samples. But even there there is a misconstrual of what is happening. The level underlying the use of a general term, which has in it everything that could be at stake in ascribing the term, is meant to start to look incoherent. How *could* anything like that represent my knowledge? Any candidate factor would still leave open the question of how it is to be applied. But then, all that has been added in talk of an underlying level is otiose, idling. That is the problem with the *way out*.

One further feature of family resemblance notions is important: we cannot foresee what features of an object might come to be relevant in a new case of ascription. Perhaps to overstate the point: When we understand a general term, it is not the case that we know what it is to predicate the term of any given object. I.e., we might distinguish between what it is to call *this* a game and what it is to call any arbitrary item a game. It is misleading to say that we "know" the latter.

This play between the particular case and the general capacity to ascribe terms is taken by J.L. Austin, in "The Meaning of a Word," to lead us in bad directions. In one sense it is trivial to say that when we understand a word we know what it is to predicate it of something. But insofar as that can be exploited as an *explication*, it is misleading. Also, Stanley Cavell suggests in Chapter 7 of *The Claim of Reason* that Wittgenstein has a positive encounter with the idea of fixity that he is trying to undercut. Cavell says that the *tolerance* of a word is a vital part of the way that language functions. It is not merely that there are cases undecided by our understanding of a general term, but also that we *could* decide them later. That is intrinsic to the way that language operates. -Now it is true that Wittgenstein rejects the idea of language-games as circumscribed by rules. At the same time, though, we do not want to say that new cases *change* our understanding of, say, "game."