

A Critical Study of Two Conceptions of Wittgenstein's "Family Resemblance"

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ABSTRACT

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In the *Blue Book* (pp. 17-18) and in the *Philosophical Investigation* (§§ 66-67), Wittgenstein offers the idea of 'family resemblances' to explain the relation between some 'things'. This paper first explores two accounts of this idea, one by Renford Bambrough and the other by Ilham Dilman. This reveals that there are at least two different accounts of 'family resemblances'. Secondly, the paper sets out a critical assessment of both accounts so as to suggest that they both fail at what they claim to do.

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Introduction

The problem of universals has been a far-reaching problem in the history of philosophy and many philosophers have addressed it in one or another way. From Plato and Aristotle to Scholastic and Islamic philosophers and others have dealt with this problem and put forth various solutions. Some of Wittgenstein scholars believe that Wittgenstein's doctrine of 'Family Resemblances' is yet another solution for the problem of universals. Renford Bambrough is one of these. Ilham Dilman, on the contrary, believes that as much as Wittgenstein has commented on the problem of universals he has not put forward the idea of 'family resemblance' as a solution to this problem. In this essay, I am going to explain these two accounts and show how they both fail to do what they claim. Bambrough's position is well illustrated in his 1960 paper, *Universals and Family Resemblances*, and Dilman has expressed his view, mainly in reaction to Bambrough's, in different places in his books. First I am going to take a brief look at Bambrough's paper to see what he thinks of Wittgenstein's position on this matter. Then I will turn to Dilman's stance on Bambrough's account.

1. Bambrough: Family Resemblances

At the beginning of his paper, Bambrough explicitly says that he believes Wittgenstein has solved the problem of universals and that 'in seeking for Wittgenstein's solution, we must look mainly to his remarks about "family resemblances" and to his use of the example of games' (Bambrough, 1960: 207).

Simply put, the problem of universals is how general words apply to numerous instances. One answer has always been that all the instances share an aspect and this common aspect makes them instances of the same word. Since this common aspect is called the 'essence,' this answer is known as the 'essentialist answer.' Bambrough holds that Wittgenstein rejects essentialism and the essentialist answer to the problem of universals.

What does essentialism have to do with realism? Since the essentialists believe that the common aspect 'really,' objectively, exists in the instances and is not made up by our minds, essentialism is a 'realistic' position. Opposed to this realistic essentialism we have nominalism that does not believe in a common aspect among the instances and says things called by the same name have no common aspect but the name they are called by. Thus in the problem of universals, there are at least two groups of philosophers: essentialists or realists who hold the instances to have a common aspect, in reality, and nominalists who do not believe in common aspect among instances. Bambrough says that even though Wittgenstein rejects realism, he does not embrace nominalism (Bambrough, 1960: 218). He argues that Wittgenstein has offered a third position, which solves the problem of universals. Let us first look at the criticisms that Bambrough says Wittgenstein had of realism, and then see what Wittgenstein's solution, the third solution from Bambrough's point of view, is.

The realist and the nominalist both share the presupposition that if the application of a name to its instances is to have objective justification, there must exist, in reality, a common element among the instances. So the nominalist, who does not believe in the common element in reality, lets go of the objective justification, and the realist, who tries to keep the objective justification, seeks to spot the common element in reality. Wittgenstein does not accept this presupposition. As Bambrough says, Wittgenstein 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 (universalia in rebus) or a common relation that all games bear to something that is not a game (universalia ante res) (Bambrough, 1960: 218).

Wittgenstein's view consists of two parts: (1) to keep the objectivity, instances do not need to share a common feature. No feature is shared by all the instances. Rather, the instances have family resemblances. "A feature shared by all instances" is exactly the presupposition that Wittgenstein denies. (2) Categorizations are based on people's interests, so there might be people who categorize and name things differently. However, all categorizations are rooted in similarities and differences that are seen in things. Different people, based on their interests and goals, pick different features to be the foundation of their categorization. Trees, for example, could be grouped either by outward similarities like leaves or fruits or by whether they are suitable to make boats from. However, both groupings are based on objective features (not one single feature) of trees that exist independent of us; that is, they are not arbitrary.

Thus we could say, according to Bambrough, Wittgenstein is a moderate realist: he accepts the principle of realism but with two qualifications: First, he does not believe in a common feature among the instances and thinks family resemblances can very well explain how numerous instances are related to a general name. Second, although he sees categorizations as being based on objective features, he assigns a role to human interests and goals as well.

2. Dilman

Now let's turn to Dilman's understanding of Bambrough's idea and see whether and to what extent he agrees with it. Dilman has expressed his view in different books and one essay. He first spoke about it in his 1978 essay, *Universals: Bambrough on Wittgenstein*. Then, in 1981, in his book, *Studies in Language and Reason*, he dedicated a chapter to this issue, *Bambrough: Universals and Family Resemblances*. In 1998, in his *Language and Reality*, he examined this topic again in a chapter titled *Bambrough on Wittgenstein: Universals and Family Resemblances*. Finally, in 2002, in his *Wittgenstein's Copernican Revolution*, chapter 3, part three, he talked about this in a couple of pages. Here I will try to give a consistent account of differences from Bambrough.

Dilman, unlike Bambrough, does not think that Wittgenstein has put forward the idea of 'family resemblances' with the intention of solving the problem of universals by a third alternative other than realism and nominalism: 'Bambrough represents it too much as a third thesis and in this I cannot go along with him' (Dilman, 1998: 132). Dilman believes that 'family resemblances' and

the metaphor of “games” belong to a broader issue, which is explaining the relation between various meanings of a formal concept in different language games. ‘It is, therefore, a mistake to think of the problem with which he [Wittgenstein] is primarily concerned there as being the traditional problem of universals’ (Dilman, 1998: 141).

It is true that Dilman is aware of the flaws Wittgenstein saw in realism and he tries to expound them in more details than Bambrough. However, he thinks that ‘family resemblances’ is to be seen as part of a bigger topic that permeates the whole of Wittgenstein’s philosophy; rather than something limited to one paragraph in *Philosophical Investigation*, something that is put forth to solve the problem of universals.

‘[...] in so far as Wittgenstein did make a contribution to the traditional problem of universals, as I agree with Bambrough he did, this is part of a larger mosaic which embraces his whole philosophy of logic and mathematics’ (Dilman, 1981: 187).

Dilman agrees with Bambrough that Wittgenstein rejects essentialism without embracing nominalism. I am going to skip Dilman’s account of Wittgenstein’s critical views on essentialism, which is much more detailed than what Bambrough says in his essay. Instead, I will only focus on Dilman’s conception of Wittgenstein’s idea of ‘family resemblances’ and how it differs from Bambrough’s. Most of Dilman’s discussion on this subject is a reaction to Bambrough, so I think looking at their divergence could give us a better understanding of Dilman’s view.

2.1. The Difference between Dilman and Bambrough

Despite agreeing with Bambrough about Wittgenstein’s critical view on essentialism, Dilman disagrees with Bambrough in two respects. First, as I pointed out, Dilman does not think that ‘family resemblances’ is meant to solve the problem of universals. To him, Wittgenstein is not concerned to solve this problem and give a third alternative. He says, ‘I hope it is clear that in thus rejecting what he does (the common properties thesis), he is not (i) embracing nominalism, implying that *nothing* gives a face a friendly aspect, *nothing* makes chess a game, nor (ii) putting forward an alternative general thesis, the thesis of family resemblances, in its place – as Bambrough suggests’ (Dilman, 1998: 134). In other words,

He [Wittgenstein] was concerned to show its [essentialism’s] crudity and to demonstrate that the hopes we build on it are unfounded and come from confusion. He was not himself putting forward a positive theory. For I have suggested that such a positive theory is open to some of the same criticisms that apply to the theory which it is meant to replace (Dilman, 1974: 53).

If my understanding is correct, Dilman is saying that Wittgenstein has been concerned to show that the ultimate justification for words’ use, what essentialism and nominalism try to explain, is a ‘showable’ matter – not something that can be put in words. That is to say, the problem of universals is what *ultimately* justifies the application of a general name to its instances. What

ultimately makes certain things be the instances of a concept? Wittgenstein believes that *ultimately* it is not names nor the objective features of things that make a general name applicable to its instances, but it is the grammars that do so. And grammars are not ‘sayable’. Therefore the answer to the problem of universals is not a ‘sayable’ matter and so it cannot be theorized. If we assume the ‘family resemblances’ to be an answer to the problem of universals, it follows that Wittgenstein was trying to do something that he himself deemed impossible. As Dilman says,

[...] but we cannot say what the *ultimate* justification of any term amounts to. If we could, that would amount to a philosophical thesis. We can, however, show by means of a variety of good examples the kind of things we take for granted when we give justifications in the course of our use of language (Dilman, 1998: 139).

Secondly, Dilman believes that by bringing in the ‘human interests’ and adding it to the idea of ‘family resemblances’ Bambrough is ascribing a Lockean view to Wittgenstein, and this is wrong. Wittgenstein’s view has nothing to do with Locke’s, and this is a misunderstanding on Bambrough’s side. I will first give a brief account of Locke’s view and then I will present Wittgenstein’s position according to Dilman.

Locke argued that since, except only in mathematics, we have no access to the essence of things, we have no choice but to choose from the similarities that nature provides us with, and by putting them together come up with a nominalistic or human-made essence. Nature, however, provides us with far too many similarities and differences, and we choose only the ones that fulfil our interests, and this is how the meaning of words is formed. From different features of honey, for example, we take ‘yellowness’, ‘sweetness’, and ‘bee-made’, and put them together to make the definition of honey. This is something between essentialism and nominalism. On the one hand, it acknowledges the common features among instances and on the other hand makes room for human interests in choosing the similarities (Dilman, 1998: 124-5).

Bambrough’s example of the South Sea islanders who categorize and name trees in a different manner from ours, but still based on objective similarities, shows that he understands Wittgenstein in a Lockean way. Bambrough argues that there are objective similarities and differences among trees, and humans choose some of them, based on their interests, to be the foundation of their categorizations. Even though categorizations are different, they are not arbitrary. They are ultimately based on objective similarities and differences among the trees. This is not what Wittgenstein says. In fact, this ‘kind of realism which Bambrough attributes to Wittgenstein, the way in which in the end he separates language and reality is antithetical to the whole tenor of Wittgenstein’s thought about language in the *Investigations*, *Zettel* and *On Certainty*’ (Dilman, 1974: 45).

Thus Bambrough’s position is a form of realism, in that he thinks objective similarities and differences are already in the world and we make our general concepts by choosing some of them

based on our interests in the kind of life we have. Bambrough does not state explicitly, but since he sees this as an answer to the problem of universals, it is safe to assume that he considers this as applicable to all concepts or general names. That is, no distinction between formal and empirical concepts can be seen in his words. In short, we can say Bambrough's realism has two elements: (i) all concepts or general names are achieved by comparing and choosing from the mass of the objective similarities and differences among things. (ii) Nothing, except for the interests and needs of those who make the general names, has a role in the process of making general names.

2_2. Dilman on Wittgenstein's idea

1_2_2. Dilman on Family Resemblances

As I said, to Dilman, Wittgenstein did not mean to solve the problem of universals by the idea of 'family resemblances'. He was rather trying to explain the relation between language games. That is, he was not so much looking at the empirical concepts as he was concerned to explain the formal or logical concepts. As Dilman says, 'when Wittgenstein speaks of a family of cases and of family resemblances in connection with language-games he is no longer concerned with the different things and activities we use language to describe and compare, but with the measures of comparison we use in those descriptions' (Dilman, 1974: 57). Dilman, however, does not say much in the way of explanation as to how 'family resemblance' accounts for the way language games are related to each other.

Moreover, to Dilman, incommensurability is also part of the idea of 'family resemblance'. That is, Wittgenstein believed that formal concepts or language games are incommensurable (Dilman, 1998: 140). What I gather from Dilman's words is that Wittgenstein offered 'family resemblances' in order to explain the relation between instances of the word 'proposition' in different language games. Things that are counted as propositions in language game A and things that are counted as propositions in language game B are both instances of 'proposition', but their relation to one another is of 'family resemblances' kind, not sharing a common set of features. Since propositions in language game A are made in accordance with the grammar of language game A and propositions in language game B are made in accordance with the grammar of language game B, and they take their meaning and truth conditions from that grammar, they are not commensurable with one another. In fact, they are not even about the same thing, and so we cannot compare them with each other against that thing.

What a proposition amounts to is nothing but its meaning, and its meaning is nothing but its truth conditions, that is the conditions which make it true or false. The truth conditions of a proposition are determined by the grammar governing it. The grammars consist of formal concepts. Since formal concepts have different meanings (with family resemblances) in different language games, the propositions that are made in accordance with them and take their meaning from them have only family resemblances to one another. Commensurability implicates a shared criterion.

That is for comparing two things they need to be put against the same criterion. Therefore, if two propositions have different criteria for their truth, it follows that they are incommensurable.

So far, what could be gathered from Dilman's words is that 'family resemblances' is proposed not to solve the problem of universals but to explain the relation between the meanings of a formal concept in different language games.¹ The concept 'proposition' is given as an example of a formal concept that has different meanings in different language games, that is it refers to different things. These meanings have a family resemblance to each other. I would like to emphasize that it does not say that different formal concepts have a family resemblance to each other. It rather says that different meanings of a formal concept in different language games have a family resemblance to each other. Below I will give other examples, from Dilman's works, of formal concepts whose uses in different language games have a family resemblance to one another. Dilman does not offer a detailed account of how the idea of 'family resemblances' explains the relation between different meanings of a formal concept in different language games. He is rather more concerned with criticizing the position that Bambrough ascribes to Wittgenstein. For he believes that this position is exactly the kind of realism that Wittgenstein rejected and saw as the product of a conceptual confusion. From a realist's point of view, the ultimate justification of general words is the objective similarities and differences that are found in things. Let's see why Wittgenstein rejects it.

2.2.2. Dilman's Critique of Bambrough's Realism

Bambrough and the essentialist (as representatives of realism) both believe that 'kinds' of things, for example oak tree, cat, or honey, are determined by a shared feature or a complex web of similarities in the instances. In their view, the justification of applying a word to objects or situations which are considered to be its instances is nothing but these objective similarities in the instances, and this is the end of the story. Dilman says 'to say that cases where we use the same word are related by "a complicated network of similarities" cannot be the end of the matter' (Dilman, 1978: 40). For the similarities and differences are themselves within frameworks that are not obtained by looking at the objective similarities and differences in things. Otherwise, it would be a vicious circle.² These frameworks or concepts, if they can be called 'concepts' at all, are what Wittgenstein calls 'formal concept' and thinks the realists have overlooked: 'If it were said that family resemblances determine kinds, this would leave out the following, namely that what we count as resemblances is in turn determined by our "formal concepts" and these formal concepts do not themselves indicate kinds' (Dilman, 1978: 53).

1. Note that, to Dilman, Wittgenstein distinguishes between empirical concept and formal concept. As I will explain later, Dilman's key critique of Bambrough and other realists is that they do not acknowledge this distinction. The problem of universals concerns the empirical concepts. 'Family resemblances', however, concerns the formal concepts. That is why he says the idea of 'family resemblances' has nothing to do with the problem of universals.

2. This is why Dilman says realism leads to a vicious circle. The realists believe that all concepts are obtained from reality (i.e. objective similarities and differences), while, to Dilman, some concepts are the grammar (framework, presupposition) of our turning to the reality and obtaining them from reality would be a vicious circle.

Formal concepts could be said to be relative. The concept of 'similarity' is a formal concept. It is well possible that something which counts as similarity in a language game does not count as similarity in another language game. As Dilman says, 'we could say that terms like "simple", "uniform", "consistent", "similar", "same", "exact" are relative terms, since what may truly be called simple (e.g.) in one context may count as composite in another. There is no absolute distinction between what is simple and what is complex, what is exact and what is inexact, what is uniform and what is random, and also between what things are similar and what things are dissimilar' (Dilman, 1978: 48). The idea of 'family resemblances' is basically proposed to explain this relativity. Wittgenstein's intention was to explain the fact that a word like 'similarity' in different language games is used in different meanings which have family resemblances to each other. The meaning of a formal concept comes from the language game in which it is used – outside that language game or without considering it, the formal concept will have no specific meaning (Dilman, 1978: 48).

Thus 'objective similarities and differences' rely on the formal concepts of 'similarity' and 'difference', of which the realist seems to be unaware. That is, to Wittgenstein, objective similarities and differences cannot be the ultimate justification of words' uses. The word 'ultimate' is important here, for Wittgenstein is not saying that objective similarities and differences do nothing in words' definitions and applications. We define apples and lemons, for example, by means of their objective similarities and differences, and when we are to decide whether something is an apple or a lemon we do so by these similarities and differences. He argues that this is not the end of the matter. There being similarities and differences is dependent on there being things on which we agree. The ultimate justification of words' definitions and uses is to be sought in this. These things, however, are not sayable. So Wittgenstein has not offered a third solution for the problem of the justification of words' uses. Rather he believes that this matter is not sayable, so it could not be explained through a theory (Dilman, 1998: 138-9).

What is important here is that objective similarities and differences do not already exist for all human beings. And this is contrary to what Bambrough thinks. He thinks of similarities and differences as a pool from which humans choose according to their interests and goals, and this is how classifications are done. However, in Wittgenstein's view, if there were a people who differ from us in their formal/logical concepts, the similarities and differences that they see would be different from what we can see. The realists do not seem to recognize this (Dilman, 1978: 51-2).

I would like to emphasize these last sentences. Dilman says that it is not possible to speak about the existence or nonexistence of anything regardless of the language games. When we say if someone does not have a certain formal concept such and such similarity won't exist 'for her', one may ask whether that similarity exists or not after all. In other words, does she cause that similarity to exist or it already exists and she only gets to see it? What this question presupposes is exactly what Dilman tries to reject, namely 'the world without a subject'. A certain similarity or difference

exists for someone who has the relevant formal concept and does not exist for someone who does not. It is meaningless to ask whether that similarity or difference exists regardless of the person and her formal concepts. To answer this question we have to have access to the world independent of any language games or grammars, which we do not. Bambrough is wrong in that he thinks everyone has access to all similarities and differences in the world and chooses from them according to her interests in life, and this is how general concepts are created. However, recognizing the similarities and differences among things is dependent on the person having the relevant formal concept or grammar. Without this formal concept or grammar, she would not see any similarity among things to be the foundation of his concept-forming. I will explain this a little more in the next section.

In short, we can say that Dilman's critique of Bambrough has two parts: (i) Not all concepts are obtained by referring to the objective similarities and differences among things (the distinction between empirical and formal concepts). (ii) Some of the formal concepts are presupposed in obtaining the empirical concepts, so if someone did not have these formal concepts certain similarities and differences would not exist for her.

3_2_2. The Way Classifications Are Based on Formal Concepts

Dilman's account of the mechanism of the connection between empirical concept formation and formal/logical concepts or language games is very brief. He says it is true that we refer to similarities and differences in forming concepts, but this referring is itself done in the framework of certain formal concepts. As I quoted above, he says 'if it were said that family resemblances determine kinds, this would leave out the following, namely that what we count as resemblances is in turn determined by our "formal concepts" and these formal concepts do not themselves indicate kinds' (Dilman, 1978: 53). The only formal concepts Dilman mentions in this connection are 'similarity' and 'difference'. To him, 'similarity' is a formal concept and does not have the same meaning in different language games (Dilman, 1978: 48).

As Dilman says, in the course of classification or generalization, what counts as similarity or difference is dependent on what is being classified. Logically, what is being classified is known to us prior to the classification. If we did not know what we are classifying, we would not know what to count as similarity or difference. In other words, the meaning and criteria of similarity and difference come from what is being classified. What counts as similarity or difference in classifying trees does not count as so in classifying films. The meaning of 'similarity' varies from one language game to another. This is what Dilman speaks of as formal concepts being rooted in language games (Dilman, 1981: 182; 1998: 119).

Apparently Dilman is saying that if someone asks 'the similarities and differences between what objects are you comparing?' the answer could be 'trees'. And if she further asks 'what plants count as trees?', we could answer her using the similarities and differences between plants. These questions and answers could go on, but they have to stop at a certain point. Dilman does not say

where this certain point is. He says we go back until we get to a grammar, but he does not say what that grammar is – tree? Plant? Living being? Physical thing? He says it is not like we keep going back until we get to molecules and atoms. What is clear is that he is saying in each classification there are things that determine what counts as similarity and difference. These things are language games or grammars in which those classifications are carried out, and are epistemologically different from the similarities and differences which are used in the classification. Thus ‘similarity’ and ‘difference’ are formal concepts, and their meanings and criteria are determined by the language game in which they are used. And it is only after this meaning determination that the process of comparing similarities and differences, the process that the realist is concerned with, begins.

4_2_2. Formal / Logical Concepts

To Dilman, concepts fall into two groups: empirical concepts and formal concepts. Wittgenstein's Copernican revolution, the main topic of Dilman's book (2002), in the first step, is to acknowledge this distinction. But what are formal concepts and how are they obtained? Dilman does not hand us a criterion to recognize formal concepts. He names a couple of them and points out some of their features. The ones that he mentions include the following: number, colour, proposition, reason, justification, knowledge, property, similarity, regularly, accord and conflict with reality (Dilman, 1978: 56), between (Dilman, 1978: 57), arbitrary (Dilman, 1998: 138), mind, matter, time, number, particular numbers such as 1, 2, 3, ... (Dilman, 2011: 27), simple, complex, uniform, similar, different, the same, exact, deep, sound, quantity, truth, and human being. From what Dilman says about these concepts, I have gathered three main characteristics for formal concepts:

(1) The first feature of formal concepts is that they cannot be talked about. They are not the kind of matter that can be explained, defined, or taught to others in this way.

Wittgenstein would say that "That is a sound", "That is a colour", "This is a proposition", "This is a thought", "This is a human being" are not things that can be said, except in special circumstances - perhaps in teaching a foreigner the meaning of these English words. You cannot point to a colour: "This is a colour". (Dilman, 1978: 55)

Formal concepts are things that are presupposed in our talks, explanations, and definitions. Neither is there any obscurity around using them nor can they be explained to anyone who does not know them. As Dilman puts it:

"Red is a colour" cannot be said informatively. Its being a colour appears in the use of the word "red". It is not something that you know in the sense that you might have been ignorant of it. Since in order not to know it you would have to know what "red" means and not know that it is a colour. It would be nonsense to think that you could examine what "this" or "red" refers to and find out that it is

a colour, as you can examine a rock to see whether or not it is granite. (Dilman, 1978: 55)

That is to say, formal concepts cannot be a predicate. We cannot, for example, say ‘blue is a colour’, ‘table is a material object’, or ‘three is a number’. Dilman thinks this is because formal concepts are already taken for granted in the meaning of words relevant to that formal concept. Formal concepts are presupposed in our speaking about things. For example, a person who says something about a table presupposes its being a material object; so it makes no sense to say ‘a table is a material object’.

So the first property of the formal concepts is that they are not ‘sayable’ matters; they rather show themselves. The things we say about them are in the way of elucidating and awakening, rather than defining them. Formal concepts are the showables that are taken for granted in language games.

(2) The meanings of a formal concept vary from one language game to another, such that there is hardly any similarity between them. The word ‘deep’, for example, is used with both a ‘grief’ and a ‘well’. Is there a similarity between its two meanings?

Wittgenstein asks us to consider the word ‘strain’ as we use it when we speak of physical and mental strain. We could think of other such examples - the word ‘deep’ as applied to a well, to a voice and to sorrow, the word ‘high’ as applied to a tree and to a note. What similarity is there between physical and mental strain? If we say ‘there is’ isn’t that remarkable? (Dilman, 2002: 70-1)

This ‘gap in meaning’ makes it impossible to go from one meaning to another. That is if one knows the meaning of a formal concept one cannot move on and recognize its instances in other language games:

Well, with a word like ‘red’ or ‘table’ or ‘tree’ or ‘dog’, once we have gone through the initial stage of training we go on by ourselves and apply the word in new cases. We could then be said to recognize a new variety of table or dog or tree as a table or dog or tree. It is not like this with the words ‘truth’ (‘Christ is the truth’), ‘saying something’ (‘this novelist has a great deal to say’), or ‘between’ (‘orange is between red and yellow’). Here we learn new uses of these words (Dilman, 1998: 140).

(3) There is no separation between a formal concept and its instance. According to Dilman, empirical concepts, unlike formal/logical concepts, are separate from their instance or object. The concept of a table, for example, is different from the table itself. Therefore, it is quite possible for a person to know the meaning of ‘table’ without knowing whether there is a table in a certain room. Thus ‘table exists’ is a meaningful proposition, i.e. one can determine its truth or falsity by referring to the world. However, formal concepts are not so. Formal concepts are always along with their objects, and obtaining them is obtaining their objects.

In other words, the predicates 'exist' and 'not exist' could be predicated of an empirical concept. However, this cannot be done with a formal concept. For formal concepts are not names of things and so it is not possible for them to exist or not. Formal concepts have no object in the world. 'Physical object' is a formal concept, and so 'physical objects (do not) exist' is a meaningless proposition. Dilman continues:

Thus while it makes good sense to ask whether unicorns exist or whether, unknown to us, there may still exist some unicorns in some uninhabited region of this earth, it makes no sense to ask whether physical objects or numbers exist, or whether the past is real. Wittgenstein expressed this clearly in the Tractatus: 'One cannot say, for example, "There are objects" [or "There are physical objects"]', as one might say "There are books [on my bookshelf]" (4.1272) (Dilman, 2002: 43).

Neither can we say of 'colour', another formal concept, that 'colour exists'. The concept 'colour' does not refer to a set of objects in the world. It rather points to some 'conditions' which are presupposed in speaking about colours. 'Conditions' are not objects, and cannot exist in the sense that objects exist. That is, we cannot say of 'conditions' to exist in the same sense we say 'coins' exist, for example. Dilman does not say much about these 'conditions'.

Apparently, Dilman understands 'existence' as spatial existence. He argues that 'colour exists' is a meaningless proposition because colour does not exist in a place. If someone said colours exist in the world, Dilman would tell her that the world is not a place in which colours could be said to exist (Dilman, 2002: 44). 'Colour' is not the name of an object or a set of objects. It is rather a set of conditions that are taken for granted in speaking about colours. So are other formal concepts. About 'number' Dilman says:

'Are there numbers?' on the other hand is a philosophical question; [...] it is a question about what the intelligibility of what is said in mathematics presupposes. Kant would characterize it as a 'transcendental' question that is a question pertaining to the possibility of mathematics. (Dilman, 2002: 44)

We could say, in Kant's words, that formal concepts are 'transcendental', that is they underlie the possibility of different forms of discourse.

(4) Formal concepts are not fallible. Dilman says it is not possible for one to be mistaken about a formal concept, which could easily happen in the case of empirical concepts. Having a formal concept is having an ability, and it does not make any sense to be mistaken about an ability (Dilman, 2002: 53). He seems to be arguing that one could misunderstand an empirical concept, like someone who thinks whatever swims in water is called a 'fish'. But it is not possible for her to misunderstand a formal concept. That is to say, it is not possible for her to misunderstand 'physical object', for example, and yet to make meaningful sentences about physical objects and to determine their truth or falsity.

He apparently is saying that in the case of empirical objects, the concept and the instance are separate from each other. In spite of having the concept, therefore, we may not know if there is an instance or we may make a mistake in recognizing it. If we have a proposition with an empirical concept in the subject, whether it has 'exist' or any other predicate, it might be true or false and we might make a mistake in determining its truth or falsity. Formal concepts, on the other hand, are not so. Formal concepts refer to a set of common criteria and behaviours among people. That is, if there were a 'proposition' with a formal concept in the subject, whether it has 'exist' or any other predicate, it would not be true or false, and it is not possible for the person who uses it to make a mistake in recognizing its instances.

To put it more unequivocally, we can say formal concepts do not refer to an object in the world and so we cannot speak about their existing or not existing or our making a mistake in recognizing them. A formal concept refers to a logical space or a linguistic lens which the speakers of the language either have it on their eyes or not.

In short, we could say formal concepts are 'transcendental' concepts. That is, (i) they are not obtained from experiment, (ii) they cannot be examined empirically, (iii) they are presupposed in any empirical encounter with the world, (iv) they do not refer to objects in the world, and (v) they have different meanings in different language games.

The objects of the formal concepts of our language however, to continue in the Kantian idiom, the reality of the physical world for instance, is not subject to any kind of investigation. Here there is no distinction between concept and object. To possess the concept, the formal concept, that is to be master of the language, is to possess the object. If I may put it this way: here the concept we possess gives us the object. In Wittgenstein's words: 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is' (P. I. §373). For instance, it 'tells' us that a physical object has 'a continued and independent existence'. This is not anything we find out by any kind of investigation such as we carry out to find the properties and behavior of an object, substance, or material- such as when we test a girder for its strength or try to find out whether some material is shrink-proof (Dilman, 2002: 10).

I am not quite clear as to what he means by 'To possess the concept, the formal concept, that is to be master of the language, is to possess the object'. But it is evident that, to him, formal concepts, such as 'physical object', are conditions and presuppositions of any empirical encounter with the world, and so they cannot themselves be subject to empirical examination. If I understand him right, he is saying that an object's being physical is not an empirical matter or subject to examination. 'Fragility' or 'conductivity' of an object, for example, can be examined, but its being physical cannot be examined. For 'being physical' is the presupposition of any examination to which it could be subject. Consequently, 'being physical' cannot be examined itself. Let us suppose, for instance, that 'being sensible' is a constituent of 'being physical'. Obviously, anything that is to be taken to the laboratory to be examined must be 'sensed' in one way or another. Otherwise, how would it be possible to take it to the laboratory? The object's 'being physical',

therefore, is taken for granted before the examination, rather than something to be determined by the examination.

3. Critical Assessment

This section is meant to call into question not only Bambrough's account of 'family resemblances' but also Dilman's conception of this idea.

1. Does 'family resemblance' help to explain how a universal concept is applied to its instances?

Here I do not intend to evaluate Bambrough's or Wittgenstein's argument. However, in response to Bambrough's bold claim that Wittgenstein has solved the problem of universals by means of 'family resemblances', I would like to say, very briefly, that this is not true, and 'family resemblances' is not the solution. The only thing the idea of 'family resemblances' does is to take away the quiddity and borderlines between things and put them on a spectrum where they 'have family likenesses which are not clearly defined' (*Blue Book*, p. 20) (Dilman, 1978: 39). If watermelons have family resemblances to each other, they definitely have resemblances to melons too, and melons are not unlike cantaloupes, etc. If the idea of 'family resemblances' is to be taken seriously, hardly can we say what is not a watermelon.

The problem of universals is about why and how a general name applies to certain objects or situations that are thought to be its instances. How can 'family resemblances' be an answer to this? According to the idea of 'family resemblances', instances of a general name do not share a single feature; they do not share the same set of features either: it is not like the property A alone, or along with properties B and C, are found in all instances. Rather the instances are like siblings belonging to a family that has, say, 10 distinctive features; yet it is not like all the members have all the 10 features, but every member has at most 6 of them. Thus no single feature is necessarily found in all members. Every two members that we take are similar in some respect and different in some other. If this is what is meant by 'family resemblances', it does not seem to be able to explain how general names apply to their instances or how certain objects are considered to be instances of a general name. For 'family resemblances' fades the border between kinds in such a way that you could easily slide from one to the other.

Now imagine another family which shares 7 features with the first family and differs in the other 3 features. Take a member who has 6 features out of these 7 common features. Which family does she belong to? If someone has 3 features of the first family and 3 features of the second, which family does she belong to? The idea of 'family resemblances' fails to answer any of these questions. Moreover, it is never clear how many features does a person need to have to count as a member. A member of the family might only share her nose with some other family members. Is having only one feature enough to be the instance of a general name? Is being sweet enough for something to be an instance of honey? How about being sweet and yellow? A saffron candy is both sweet and yellow. Why is it not an instance of honey then?

As long as it is not clear what feature(s) an object must have to be an instance of a general name, logically any object could be an instance of just any name. In the case of families, also, if we ignored people's IDs and just looked at their appearance, the current borders between families would fade away and it would be almost impossible to say who belongs to what family.

As Odai Al Zoubi points out in his paper, different formulations of this objection can be found in Baker and Hacker (2009), Bellaimy (1990), Mandelbaum (1995) and Prien (2004). After presenting the objection, he describes two potential solutions: 'the psychological solution' and 'the form of life solution' (Zoubi, 2016: 48). It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine these solutions here.

2. In the last part, I tried to explain that, contrary to what Bambrough thinks, 'family resemblances' does not contribute to the problem of universals. In this part, I will try to show that the idea of 'family resemblances', unlike what Dilman thinks, fails at explaining the relation between different meanings of formal concepts in different language games. Dilman claims that Wittgenstein has proposed the idea of 'family resemblances' in order to explain the different meanings that formal concepts have in various language games. What makes this claim hard to examine, at first glance, is the fact that he does not offer any clear-cut criterion to distinguish formal concepts from empirical concepts, which makes the whole discussion quite vague. What is and what is not a formal concept is totally obscure. He has pointed out some features of these concepts, which I mentioned above, along with some examples. It is obvious that giving examples, no matter how many, cannot replace a definition or enable us to recognize future cases. In the end, we would be left with a set of samples that is logically no different from any other set of samples.

Even if there is a clear-cut criterion for recognizing formal concepts, the idea of 'family resemblances' still won't help in recognizing them. Let's assume that we, somehow, realised that 'between' is a formal concept. According to Dilman, this concept has different meanings in different language games, i.e. in each language game it has a meaning other than what it means in other language games. That is, if it is used in, say, five different language games, it has five different meanings. These different meanings have family resemblances to one another. I am arguing that if 'family resemblances' fails at the problem of universals, which it does, it is no better here either. For any flaws that infected it there, applies here as well.

It seems that Dilman is more or less aware of this himself. He makes it clear that different meanings of formal concepts are not such that knowing one of them could lead us to the others. In other words, different meanings of a formal concept, though similar in certain respects, cannot be framed by a definition or logical formula. Thus 'family resemblances' cannot be said to explain the relation between meanings of a formal concept. It would be more accurate to say that the relation between different meanings of a formal concept is not logically explicable, just as the relation between members of a family is not logically explicable. In other words, what is meant by

'family resemblances' is a relation that is conventionally seen as a similarity, but is not logically explicable – it won't hold up under logical analysis³.

3. If, as Dilman says, the idea of 'family resemblances' is proposed, not to solve the problem of universals, but to explain the relation between formal concepts, then why does he say it contributes to the problem of universals as well? How does it contribute? Is the problem of universals a part of the problem of the relation between formal concepts? Will the relation between instances of a general name be explained if we explain the relation between formal concepts by means of 'family resemblances'?

On the one hand, Dilman rejects Bambrough's claim that 'family resemblances' is a solution to the problem of universals and says 'Bambrough represents it too much as a third thesis and in this I cannot go along with him' (Dilman, 1998: 132). On the other hand, he says 'I have suggested that in so far as Wittgenstein did make a contribution to the traditional problem of universals, as I agree with Bambrough he did, this is part of a larger mosaic which embraces his whole philosophy of logic and mathematics' (Dilman 1981: 187). Bambrough claims that Wittgenstein has solved the problem of universals by means of the idea of 'family resemblances'. Dilman, however, believes that Wittgenstein's intention was not solving the problem of universals. Yet he agrees with Bambrough that Wittgenstein has contributed to the problem of universals. So it seems Dilman is saying that although Wittgenstein did not originally intend to solve the problem of universals, 'family resemblances' somehow solves this problem too. Does Dilman see the idea of 'family resemblances' as one solution for two problems?

Dilman is inconsistent here. What is evident is that he sees 'family resemblances' as a proposal oriented toward the formal concepts and the relation between their different meanings in different language games. But whether it also solves the problem of universals has no clear answer in his writings. There are places where he explicitly says that the ultimate answer to the problem of universals is 'showable' and not theorizable, so the idea of 'family resemblances' could not be one alternative among others. For example:

I hope it is clear that in thus rejecting what he does (the common properties thesis), he is not (i) embracing nominalism, implying that nothing gives a face a friendly aspect, nothing makes chess a game, nor (ii) putting forward an alternative general thesis, the thesis of family resemblances, in its place - as Bambrough suggests (Dilman, 1998: 134).

Elsewhere, however, he gives examples to show that the instances of a universal concept, such as a 'friendly face' or 'expectation', have family resemblances to one another:

Of course it is not for nothing that we use the same word. What Wittgenstein says about facial expressions makes this plain. In connection with the example of expectation he says: "There is no single feature in common to all of them,

3. Also look at Hacker & Baker (2005: 220) where they say this qualm is misconceived.

though there are many common features overlapping. These cases of expectation form a family; they have family likenesses which are not clearly defined" (*Blue Book*, p. 20) (Dilman, 1978: 39).

The only way I can think of to save Dilman from contradiction is to take him as having two perspectives to the problem of universals: superficial perspective and deep perspective. From the superficial perspective, that is the one the essentialist and the nominalist have, the correct answer to the problem of universals is this: instances do not share in the same thing, nor do they share in nothing; they rather have family resemblances. From a deep perspective, however, which Dilman calls 'the ultimate justification for our use of words', the answer to the problem of universals is not a 'sayable' matter that can be theorized. 'Family resemblances', therefore, cannot be the ultimate answer to the problem of universals.

Whether the idea of 'family resemblances' is offered exclusively to explain the formal concepts or the solution includes the problem of universals as well, it is inadequate and fails at doing either. In the first part of this section, I described its inadequacy concerning the problem of universals. In the following parts, I will get into its inadequacy in respect to formal concepts.

4. Dilman believes that incommensurability is also part of the idea of 'family resemblances'. That is to say, the things which have family resemblances are incommensurable to each other. What he means by this term is the lack of criteria for comparing two things. If I had two paintings of the tree across my house, I could take the tree itself as the criterion to determine which of the two paintings is more similar. However, if I do not have access to the tree itself, it won't be possible to compare the two paintings in that respect. Dilman argues that the propositions made in one language game are incommensurable with propositions made in another language game, for they lack a common criterion for their truth. Conditions for a proposition's truth is determined by the grammar or language game within which the proposition is used. It, therefore, makes sense for propositions with different grammars to be incommensurable. Dilman says:

Wittgenstein does however hold that there are incommensurabilities between cultures and even between 'beliefs' held by different people in the same culture. What is considered real in one culture looks like a collective illusion to the people outside that culture (Dilman, 2002: 126).

What is problematic here is our identification of beliefs in different cultures as being the same. All we can say is that they have different beliefs and criteria of truth incommensurable with ours. (Dilman, 2002: 129-130)

But can we talk about the incommensurability of formal concepts in the same sense? Formal concepts are not 'propositions' and so they cannot be true or false. Consequently, they cannot be described as incommensurable by appealing to the lack of a common criterion of truth. Nor are they pictures of anything so we can call them incommensurable, like those two paintings. Thus ascribing incommensurability to them does not seem to make much sense.

Moreover, if two concepts are so alien to each other that there is no common base to compare them, what sense does it make to say they have family resemblances? How is it possible for two things to both have family resemblances – whatever meaning this term might have – and to be incommensurable?

5. Dilman's conception of the relation between different meanings of a formal concept is not far from 'polysemy'. He argues that different meanings of formal concepts, e.g. 'difference' or 'real', in different language games have family resemblances to each other. In colour-language, 'real' is the colour that is seen under the sunlight, while in the emotion language, it refers to a feeling that is deep and long-lasting. What family resemblances do these two meanings have? Dilman himself says these meanings are not such that knowing one of them could usher us to the next; they rather need to be learned one by one. He says:

Here we learn new uses of these words. There is nothing corresponding to the way we go on in the same way when left by ourselves until we have learnt the grammars in which the same word has a use. One can recognize for instance, that 6 is between 5 and 7, or that orange is between red and yellow, and find it natural to use this word in these cases once one has learnt arithmetic and colour-language. But until then, nothing that we have learnt in learning the use of the word 'between' in connection with the language of spatial location can enable us to use this word in these new cases. (Dilman, 2002: 129-130)

Thus even though the different meanings have a kind of similarity to each other, this similarity is not such that knowing one of them could help us move on to the next. The fact that games have no essence and are only similar to each other does not take us far. As long as there are no criteria to spot future cases, we will have to learn them one by one. In fact, formal concepts are used in different language games by equivocation. To say that these meanings have family resemblances, as long as it does not create a logical tie between them, would not be of much use. From a logical point of view, 'family resemblances' is ultimately no more than a mere equivocation.

6. And one last point about Dilman's conception of formal concepts. In describing the difference between formal and empirical concepts, Dilman points out that in the case of empirical concepts, once the meaning of the term is clear, one can go on and recognize the instances one after another. This is not possible, however, with formal concepts. For a formal concept has different meanings and so refers to different objects, and since knowing one meaning does not by itself lead us to other meanings, we would not be able to recognize all the instances of that concept. 'Walnut', for example, is an empirical concept. Once one knows its meaning, one can go on and single out its instances. This is not the case with the word 'high', for example. One who knows its meaning vis-à-vis physical objects cannot go on and recognize 'high' notes in a piece of music.

Dilman's comparison between formal and empirical concepts is logically flawed. On the one hand, he takes the relation between empirical concepts and their instances, and on the other hand,

he takes the relation between formal concepts and their different meanings. Then he concludes that empirical and formal concepts are different. However, if the comparison is done right, we will see that there is no difference in this respect between empirical and formal concepts.

Of any word, whether it refers to a formal concept or an empirical concept, we could say that if it has different meanings such that knowing one does not lead us to the others, we can never recognize all the instances by knowing only one of the meanings. This is most clear in the case of equivocation. The word ‘tab’, for example, refers to both a metal tool in kitchen and the record of an amount of money that needs to be paid. It is hard to imagine how knowing the first meaning could help one to get to the second. However, one who knows the first meaning can go on and recognize the numerous instances of it. That is, if one knows the first meaning of ‘tab’, one should be able to single out tabs among other tools. And if one knows the second meaning, one should be able to pick tabs among other documents. Thus knowing one meaning of an empirical concept that has more than one meaning does not help much to get to the other meanings. However, knowing each meaning goes hand in hand with the ability to recognize the instances.

The same is true about the formal concepts. The formal concepts have different meanings and knowing one of them cannot by itself lead us to the others. But knowing each of them enables us to recognize the instances of that meaning. If we learn how to use the word ‘between’ in mathematics, we can recognize that 6 is between 5 and 7 as we can recognize any other number being between two other numbers. That is to say, we would recognize all the instances of ‘between’ in mathematics. But we cannot, on our own, obtain the meaning of ‘between’ in the colour language. Knowing its meaning in colour-language, however, goes hand in glove with the ability to recognize its instances, e.g. that orange is ‘between’ red and yellow. One who knows this meaning will recognize its instances one after another. In the case of formal concepts, thus, different meanings are not connected to each other either, but knowing each meaning comes with the ability to recognize the instances. So we can conclude, contrary to Dilman’s flawed argument, that formal concepts are not different from empirical concept in this respect.

Conclusion

I said that Bambrough takes the idea of ‘family resemblances’ as an alternative to essentialism and nominalism in regard to the problem of universals. Dilman, however, views it as a theory to explain the formal concepts. The main point I was trying to make is that the idea of ‘family resemblances’ fails at solving the problem of universals because it leaves no clear border between things. This flaw is present in Dilman’s account too. From a logical point of view, the idea of ‘family resemblances’, whether concerning empirical concepts or formal concepts, ends in a form of equivocation. I also touched upon the fact that Dilman’s distinction between formal and empirical concepts is at best inaccurate and ill articulated.

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