

"The Lives of Families": Towards a Genealogical Reading of Family Resemblance

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Abstract

Hans Sluga argues that Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance is "systematically ambiguous" because it conflates two distinct kinds of concepts: cluster concepts, unified by overlapping resemblances, and kinship-based concepts, grounded in causal and historical relations. By treating these as if they were the same, Sluga suggests, Wittgenstein reveals a deeper limitation of his thought: his failure to fully reckon with the historical dimension of human existence. This paper challenges that diagnosis. It argues that what Sluga takes to be a problem – the interweaving of resemblance and kinship – is in fact what makes the notion of family resemblance philosophically productive. I develop this claim in three steps. First, I challenge the distinction between "cluster" and "kinship" concepts by arguing that even a supposedly paradigmatic "cluster" concept like "game" cannot be unified by purely synchronic relations of similarity. Second, I argue that Wittgenstein draws on our ordinary understanding of family resemblance, which resists any sharp separation between synchronic and diachronic relations. Third, I suggest this interdependence is integral to Wittgenstein's use of family resemblance as a model of conceptual unity over time, rather than an atemporal, synchronic account of conceptual structure at a given moment. This is shown by considering PI §67, where Wittgenstein introduces a temporal dimension by discussing how the extension of "number" changes over time. Taken together, these considerations direct us towards a genealogical reading of family resemblance, in which the unity of a concept consists in evolving patterns of resemblance that are internally shaped by historically developed practices.

Wittgenstein maintains that, for some concepts, there is no single defining feature in virtue of which we apply the same word to different things. The items falling under such concepts are connected in many different ways rather than by sharing a common property, and it is in virtue of these relations that we apply the same word to them (PI 2009: §65). The negative point—that not every concept must be unified by a defining property providing necessary and sufficient conditions for its application—is relatively straightforward. What is far less clear is what he offers in its place. Wittgenstein compares the relations that give such concepts their unity to the overlapping and criss-crossing similarities between members of a family (PI 2009: §67). According to the most common reading of this discussion, shaped by Renford Bambrough's 1960 "Universals and Family Resemblances", Wittgenstein claims that concepts apply to the different objects falling under them in virtue of a network of overlapping similarities obtaining among those objects. More recent scholarship has challenged both Bambrough's view that Wittgenstein's

discussion pertains to concepts in general, rather than to a special subset of concepts, and the assumption that the relations which constitute the structure of family resemblance are exclusively relations of similarity (see Al Zoubi 2016).

Among these readings, Hans Sluga's critical discussion (2006, 2011) stands out as particularly rich and nuanced. Sluga's point of departure is that a family in the ordinary human sense is not unified by a network of overlapping similarities among its members. Families, Sluga insists, are not simply clusters of resemblances: their members are not connected merely by overlapping similarities but by relations of kinship – grounded in descent or socially recognised forms of affiliation. Resemblance is neither necessary nor sufficient for family membership: we would not count a stranger as a member of a family simply because he resembles its members, nor deny kinship to a genuine relative who bears no noticeable resemblance to them. What matters is not overlapping similarities, but whether the individuals are bound by the kinship relations that constitute the unity of a family in the relevant context (Sluga 2006: 14–16). For Sluga, this indicates that Wittgenstein's use of the term family resemblance is "systematically ambiguous" because of its failure to distinguish between two different dimensions of the notion: resemblance and kinship (Sluga 2011: 87). The notion of family resemblance "is problematic in that its characterization draws on two quite different sets of ideas, two different vocabularies but treats them as if they were one and the same" (Sluga 2006: 14). Resemblance invites a synchronic, structural perspective in which conceptual unity consists in similarities graspable by viewing items side by side; kinship evokes a diachronic, genealogical perspective in which unity derives from relations of descent and inheritance unfolding over time. Wittgenstein, Sluga concludes, "fails to appreciate the genuine difference between these two ways of speaking, and his characterization of family resemblance combines both in a single formula" (ibid.: 14). This failure reflects a broader limitation of Wittgenstein, who never turned into a fully historicist thinker: even when dealing with overtly historical phenomena, Wittgenstein insists on treating them "in structural rather than temporal and causal terms" (Sluga 2011: 90; Sluga 2017).

Sluga's solution to the tension he identifies in Wittgenstein's discussion is to clearly distinguish between two different kinds of concepts: similarity or

cluster concepts, unified by overlapping resemblances, and kinship-based concepts, grounded in relations that are essentially causal and historical in character. I argue that Sluga is right to discern a tension in Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, but that this tension does not reflect a confusion to be resolved by sharply distinguishing between two kinds of concepts. For what appears as a tension need not be a confusion. The tension does not arise from an unclarified distinction between two kinds of concepts; rather, it reflects Wittgenstein's attempt to use family resemblance as a model of conceptual unity over time. To understand this, we need a genealogical reading of family resemblance – one that brings out the intimate relation between the network of similarities that structures the unity of a concept and the historically evolved practices through which it formed and evolved. Such a reading continues lines of interpretation that emphasise the temporally extended character of family-resemblance concepts (for different ways of developing this idea, see Hunter 1985; Mulhall 2001; Prien 2004) and argue that the relations between cases falling under a concept are not exclusively relations of similarity (Al Zoubi 2016). My aim here is not to fully develop that reading, but to suggest it provides an alternative way of making sense of this tension.

Sluga's account turns on the idea that we can, and must, "distinguish between two kinds of concepts which Wittgenstein lumps together under the heading of family resemblance" (2006: 15). On the one hand, there are "cluster" or resemblance-based concepts such as "game" or "language", which "are purely structural notions" (Sluga 2011: 89): their instances are grouped together simply by overlapping similarities. On the other hand, there are causal or kinship-based concepts, whose instances belong together because of descent, lineage, or other historically grounded, causal relations. Sluga argues that Wittgenstein fails to appreciate the difference between these two kinds of concepts, and that when he "speaks of family resemblance he seems to be speaking at times simply of clusters but at other times of things held together by causal relations" (Ibid.: 87). On Sluga's view, much of Wittgenstein's discussion, particularly on "game" and "language", is best understood as simply concerning cluster concepts (Ibid.: 87). The exegetical claim that Wittgenstein straightforwardly treats "game" as applying to items solely on the basis of similarities oversimplifies the textual complexity that Sluga himself is

at pains to bring out. More striking still is Sluga's commitment to the idea that "there are certainly concepts that apply to groups of items simply because of overlapping and crisscrossing similarities" (Ibid.: 87). This means that although Sluga rejects Bambrough's claim that Wittgenstein's remarks amount to a general theory of universals (Sluga 2006: 3), he retains the assumption that similarities alone can ground the unity of a concept such as "game". Yet this assumption is difficult to sustain. It has been challenged in different forms under what has been called the "problem of wide-open texture" (Richman 1962) and the "under-determination of extension" (Bellaimy 1990). As a closer look at the concept of "game" reveals, similarities alone are too weak to ground conceptual unity. Activities we ordinarily classify as games, such as chess, bear overlapping resemblances with other activities we also call games, such as tennis or golf. They also share similarities with practices we do not ordinarily classify as games, such as judo (see Schroeder 2017). Judo exhibits many features characteristic of games and is even included in the Olympic Games, yet we do not ordinarily call it a game. It falls under the distinct concept of "martial art". It is unclear how an appeal to resemblances alone could explain why certain features count in the case of tennis but not judo, each exhibiting some similarities while lacking others. While some commentators have sought to show that this objection can be overcome while preserving the idea of conceptual unity as grounded in similarities, these attempts succeed only insofar as they qualify the claim that mere similarities determine membership in the concept. Something more than resemblance has to be at work in constituting the unity of the concept. What matters is not only synchronic, structural relations of similarity but the diachronic, historical development of games and martial arts as related yet distinct practices with different significance in human life.

Sluga recognises that the discussion of family resemblance involves a tension between kinship and resemblance, and attempts to resolve it by distinguishing two kinds of concepts based on two different kinds of relations. As we have seen, however, similarities alone cannot provide the unity of a concept. Yet this does not mean we must collapse one side of Sluga's dichotomy into the other. What he calls cluster concepts do not necessarily behave like what he labels kinship concepts – especially if the latter are understood as unified by direct causal relations between each and every one of their members, such as

descent from a common ancestor. Wittgenstein surely did not mean to suggest that all games necessarily share a common origin or form a traceable lineage in any strict causal sense. The point, rather, is that the dichotomy obscures what is distinctive about Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance: it does not conflate two distinct models of conceptual unity, but brings into view a different model altogether – one that is both grounded in similarities and historically constituted. The key lies in unpacking in more detail the analogy Wittgenstein himself invokes. He does not simply speak of "clusters" or "classes" of similarities, but neither does he merely speak of "family". Wittgenstein speaks about *family resemblance*, and he was fully alive to the peculiarity of this kind of resemblance. When he first uses the term "family resemblance" in 1931, he explicitly distinguishes similarities between members of one and the same family from resemblances between members of different families:

Spengler could be better understood if he said: I am *comparing* different periods of culture with the lives of families; within a family there is a family resemblance, though you will also find a resemblance between members of different families; family resemblance differs from the other sort of resemblance in such and such ways, etc. (VB 1980: 14).

In PI §67, he describes family resemblances as "the various resemblances between members of a family". The analogy thus directs us to similarities within a single human family – a group whose unity, as Sluga reminds us, is constituted not by similarities, but by relations of kinship that unfold over time. But the point goes deeper. To recognise a family resemblance at all, one must already see the members as related in the relevant sense. People may share features such as build, eye colour, and temperament both with their own family members and with strangers, but such resemblances can be regarded as familial only insofar as we recognise the individuals in question as members of the same family. In our ordinary understanding of family resemblance, kinship and resemblance are mutually implicating: kinship relations are expressed in patterns of resemblance, and our recognition of family resemblances presupposes a background understanding of the people in question as related to each other. This interdependence shows that the image of family resists any clean separation of synchronic and diachronic relations. As Stephen Mulhall observes, the image of family itself carries a

temporal depth that complicates any purely structural, synchronic interpretation: "family resemblances hold not just across space but across time; a son inherits his father's build, a daughter her grandmother's eyes" (Mulhall 2001: 85). Even a snapshot of resemblances among family members at a given moment bears the imprint of its genealogy. We can observe these resemblances by looking at a family portrait. At first glance, this might appear to be a purely synchronic matter – a configuration of similarities visible all at once. But crucially, we do not perceive the similarities between figures in a family portrait as mere resemblances: we see them as family resemblances, which immediately brings genealogy into play. We group the people in a family portrait not because they resemble one another but because of their familial bonds, and we understand those resemblances as intertwined with those bonds. To the extent that we recognise these resemblances as familial, we are no longer dealing with a purely synchronic notion. Any sharp dichotomy between the synchronic and the diachronic would distort our ordinary understanding of family resemblance and, by extension, the very analogy Wittgenstein invokes. The image of family resemblance inherently interweaves synchronic and diachronic relations: the present network of similarities is shaped by relations of kinship, which in turn manifest through shifting patterns of resemblance.

One may be tempted to follow Sluga in concluding that the notion of family resemblance, precisely because it so intimately interweaves kinship and similarity, simply cannot serve as a model of conceptual unity. But this conclusion moves too fast, and loses its attraction once we recall that similarities alone cannot ground the unity of a concept. The picture begins to change if we understand family resemblance as a model of conceptual unity over time, rather than as a merely synchronic account of what holds together the instances of a concept at a given moment. On this reading, Wittgenstein does not fail to appreciate the difference between resemblance and kinship, nor does he conflate them "in a problematic fashion" (Sluga 2006: 1). Rather, he exploits their interdependence to model a form of conceptual unity that unfolds over time, both structured by similarities and constituted through historical processes. These aspects cannot be cleanly separated any more than resemblance can be separated from kinship in an actual family. Families have histories; they extend backward and forward, linking the living to their

ancestors and to those yet to come. A family is not a fixed configuration but something that evolves through time, losing members and gaining new ones, yet remaining the same family across generations. What holds for families may hold, by analogy, for concepts. Like families, concepts have histories: the patterns of similarities that make items recognisable as instances of the same concept bear the traces of their genealogy; they are themselves shaped by the historical trajectories of the practices in which those concepts have been embedded and sustained. And like the lives of families, such concepts are not static but living, evolving networks that persist in and through time, gain and lose members, and remain open to an indeterminate and unforeseeable future.

This essential temporal dimension is further obscured by Sluga's claim that kinship and cluster concepts are "open" in significantly different ways. Kinship concepts, he argues, are open "with respect to the future", whereas cluster concepts are open "with respect to relevance rather than to the future": "art" is open because we cannot determine in advance what will count as art—its course is essentially unpredictable—whereas "game" is open because "the range of relevant similarities is not fully determined" (Sluga 2006: 18). This distinction is difficult to sustain. For one thing, it underestimates the openness of so-called "cluster" concepts to the future. What we call a "game" has a history: it is shaped by evolving practices, activities, and institutions. Once this is acknowledged, the concept of "game" appears open to the future in precisely the sense Sluga reserves for kinship concepts. Its expansion to include genuinely new and unforeseeable categories—such as video games—illustrates this point. The practices through which the concept is sustained are themselves ongoing and dynamic: new games are invented, new forms of play emerge, and the concept accommodates unpredictable social, cultural, and technological developments. At the same time, the openness of concepts such as "game" and "art" to the future is inseparable from the structure of family resemblance. Extending a family-resemblance concept involves recognising resemblances, affinities, and continuities connecting new members to an existing network. Yet which similarities will come to be treated as relevant cannot be fully determined in advance. A family-resemblance concept can develop in unforeseeable ways because future participants in our historically evolved practices may come to see different similarities as salient and significant.

The idea of family resemblance as a model of conceptual unity over time is most clearly visible in Wittgenstein's discussion of "number" in §§67–8. If in §66 Wittgenstein speaks about "the activities that we call 'games'", in §67 he explicitly speaks about extending "our concept of number" through affinities with "things that have hitherto been called number" (PI 2009: §67). In doing so, he introduces a temporal dimension into the discussion of family resemblance: the focus is not solely on resemblance between things that already fall under the concept but on how the extension of the concept develops over time. Family resemblance thus operates not only synchronically but also diachronically, as a flexible, evolving web of relations that connects new cases to those that already belong to the family. Wittgenstein captures this form of conceptual unity over time through a vivid analogy: "we extend our concept of number, as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre" (PI 2009: §67). If in §67 the thread analogy illustrates how a family-resemblance concept extends into the future, Wittgenstein is also reported to use it to account for how our concepts are related to the past, allowing us to understand the remotely familiar concepts of a work like the *Iliad*. James Klagge cites J. P. Stern's recollection of Wittgenstein remarking, at a meeting on "a cold, wet November evening in 1944", that we understand what Homer means when he speaks of the heroism of Achilles or the mourning of Priam "not because these concern 'eternal values' or the 'eternally human'", but because "we are connected to Homer's world somewhat as by a rope. A rope, however, is not of one piece but consists of many interwoven, partially overlapping short strands of hemp of which none reaches from one end to the other ... The strength of the rope—our confidence that we really understand those terms—depends on the reaching-over and cutting-across of the particular, successively following usages of words; they produce what we call a tradition" (Klagge 2017: 205-6; PPO 2003: 364). Insofar as Stern's recollection is reliable, it reinforces the thought that the notion of family resemblance should be read genealogically, rather than as a mere synchronic account of how the instances of the concept hang together at a given moment. If this genealogical reading of family resemblance is correct – and establishing this fully exceeds the scope of this essay – Sluga's verdict must be reconsidered. Far from reflecting Wittgenstein's failure to grapple with history and time, family resemblance may bring into view a temporally

extended, dynamically structured form of conceptual unity, in which synchronic patterns of similarity and historically evolved practices are inseparably intertwined.

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