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Can Family Resemblance Determine a Concept?

What is known as the history of concepts is really a history either of our knowledge of concepts or of the meanings of words. Often it is only after immense intellectual effort, which may have continued over centuries, that humanity at last succeeds in achieving knowledge of a concept in its pure form, in stripping off the irrelevant accretions which veil it from the eyes of the mind[1]. – Gottlob Frege

Abstract

This short essay analyses the notion of 'family resemblance' and investigates its ability to determine a concept. I explore the topic starting from Frege's definition of a concept and I imagine possible criticism of the shortcomings brought by the lack of boundaries of this notion. I argue against such an objection and I try to show how a concept can be determined through family resemblance.

Introduction

In his exploration of the essence of language, Wittgenstein introduced the idea of a web of resemblances that would explain how certain objects are connected through overlapping similarities, rather than through one common feature.

The notion of 'family resemblance' has created controversy ever since it was introduction in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953). The main criticism brought to the idea has been its lack of boundaries and the way it prevents this notion from determining a concept.

In what follows, I will try to show that failing to determine a sharply defined concept does not make family resemblance incapable of determining a concept altogether. I will start by describing the notion of 'family resemblance' and the context which led to its introduction. Starting from Frege's definition of a concept

and using Wittgenstein's views on boundaries, I will build my argument and try to show that family resemblance *can*, in fact, determine a concept.

On Family Resemblance

Almost thirty years before the introduction of 'family resemblance', in an attempt to understand the relationship between language and the world, Wittgenstein was articulating the 'picture theory of meaning'[2]. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) propositions were pictures of reality, they were meaningful by picturing state of affairs. When he returned to investigating the topic, he found there was more to meaning than pictures of reality. He now understood language as a kind of tool where meaning was given by the way language was used.

While investigating the way in which a language works, he found there wasn't always one common essence to similar words. It was in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) where he introduced a notion that would explain this connection:

> I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities
> than "family resemblances"; for the various resemblances between
> members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait,
> temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. And
> I shall say: "games" form a family.

> (Wittgenstein 1953, § 66)

The term is self-explanatory: members of a family share different similarities with each other. One does not need to identify one single common feature among all members to tell they are a family. It is rather a web of features that makes it easy to state that they are part of one family.

This simple notion allowed for new conversations to happen in contexts where the essence defended by realism was not sufficient, as it happened in art[3] or taxonomy[4]. It also spurred debates on whether allowing such a high number of

objects as members of the same 'family' still served a good purpose, that of determining a concept.

What determines a concept?

In his paper *On Concept and Object* (1892), Frege refers to concepts as being predicative. By this, he means that a concept is the *meaning* (*Bedeutung*) of a grammatical predicate. In his words, 'something falls under a concept and the grammatical predicate stands for this concept' (1892).

Frege also brings into the conversation the importance of sharp boundaries and the incompatibility between concepts and vagueness. In his words:

> To a concept without a sharp boundary there would correspond an
> area that had not a sharp boundary-line all around, but in places
> just vaguely faded away into the background. This would not
> really be an area at all; and likewise, a concept that is not sharply
> defined is wrongly termed a concept.

> (Frege cited in 1952, p.159)

Frege sees those concepts which are still 'in a state of flux' and which haven't been given 'final and sharp limits' as constructions that cannot be recognized as concepts. He calls them concepts which are not genuine, 'because the sharp delimitation is lacking'. (1968, p.71)

If the lack of boundaries makes it impossible to determine a concept, can family resemblance fulfill such a role? Frege references vague boundaries, yet vague boundaries are not one and the same with no boundaries at all.

Wittgenstein was familiar with Frege's views and he anticipated critics to his newly introduced notion. Here was his thinking on the matter:

> But is a blurred concept a concept at all? Is an indistinct
> photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an

advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need?

(Wittgenstein 1953, S 71)

Let us think of 'home' as a concept. We might be tempted to say that the concept of 'home' has clear and sharp boundaries. Under it, we can find different *things* that share one common feature: they represent the space where one lives. However, this is one of the concepts with numerous uses. We often hear students uttering the words "I'm going home for the weekend", when in fact, the space where they live is the campus. If we were to search for a common feature such as having a roof, being a stable construction, standing for where one sleeps, we would leave outside of these boundaries all the improvised shelters (homes for those with no homes), the RVs (homes for the wanderers) or the summer beach tents (homes for the free-spirited). What about the frequent flyers who reference hotels as their homes? What about surfers who call California their home? Its boundaries are not sharp.

Does the vagueness of its boundaries turn the idea of 'home' into one that is ineligible for being a concept? Can 'home' be a concept determined by family resemblance?

One approach to solving this is considering the use of a concept. We can draw boundaries ad hoc, keeping in mind the context in which we are using it in ordinary language. On a specific occasion, in a certain context, the concept receives clear boundaries. Also, we could introduce another concept and, thus, have a mutually exclusive pair of concepts that define boundaries between them. Home and office, just like home and school, share the similarity of being a stable construction where one might spend most of their time. However, neither an office, nor a school, are homes. This is one boundary created ad hoc.

As Wittgenstein states "We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary — for a special purpose." (1953, § 69)

Conclusion

Frege's definition of a concept puts a significant amount of pressure on the eligibility of family resemblance to determine a concept. This is because, in Frege's views, vagueness and the lack of clear boundaries cannot stand for a genuine concept. I have argued that no clear boundaries are not one and the same with no boundaries at all. Using one of Wittgenstein's ideas, I have tried to show that boundaries of any concept determined by family resemblance can be drawn for a special purpose.

Notes

[1] Frege in *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*, as quoted by Stephen Toulmin in *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts*.

[2] According to this theory, propositions are meaningful insofar as they picture states of affairs or matters of empirical fact. Anything normative, supernatural or (one might say) metaphysical must, it therefore seems, be nonsense.

[3] In the context of a "What is Art?" debate, Morris Weitz used the notion of family resemblance in *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics* (1953)

[4] As used by Rodney Needham in a taxonomy topic in *Polythetic Classification: Convergence and Consequences* (1975)

References

1. Frege, Gottlob (1892) – *On Concept and Object*. Mind. Translated by P. T. Geach and revised by Max Black, Oxford University Press. 1951

2. Frege, Gottlob (1968) – *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. Trans. J. L. Austin. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968.

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4. Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1921) – *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Translated by Pears and McGuiness. Routledge. 1975

5. Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953) - *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell publishing (2001)