

SORIN BANGU

## Later Wittgenstein on Essentialism, Family Resemblance and Philosophical Method<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

In this paper I have two objectives. First, I attempt to call attention to the incoherence of the widely accepted anti-essentialist interpretation of Wittgenstein's family resemblance point. Second, I claim that the family resemblance idea is not meant to reject essentialism, but to render this doctrine irrelevant, by dissipating its philosophical force. I argue that the role of the family resemblance point in later Wittgenstein's views can be better understood in light of the provocative aim of his philosophical method, as stated (for instance) in PI 133: "[t]he philosophical problems" - associated with essentialism in this case, "should *completely* disappear".

### *Introduction*

In the paragraphs 65 to 67 of his *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>2</sup> (1953), Wittgenstein introduces his celebrated family resemblance point<sup>3</sup>. The example of games illustrates the claim that certain phenomena do not have "one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all - but they are *related* to one another in many different ways" – these similarities are characterized as 'family resemblances'. Thus, insisting that "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'" is nothing but

---

<sup>1</sup> I thank to John Canfield and Oswald Hanfling for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter PI, and the number of section. The citations from Wittgenstein's writings follow the usual notations: PG for Wittgenstein (1974), BB for Wittgenstein (1964), AWL for Wittgenstein (1979), Z for Wittgenstein (1967).

<sup>3</sup> The family resemblance point is ubiquitous in Wittgenstein's writings. Philosophically important concepts (such as 'proposition', 'language' and 'number', 'understanding' or 'believing') are family resemblance concepts. See, for example BB: 17-20, 33, PI 65 – 8, 108, 135, 179, 236 etc., Z 26, PG: 112, AWL: 96, etc.

prejudice, in so far as, if we ‘look and see’, we do not find any feature common to all games in virtue of which we use the same word for all.

Although Wittgenstein’s (anti)essentialism and the family resemblance point were consistently debated in the past, they receive almost no attention in the recent literature. One possible reason for this lack of interest is that these topics seem quite transparent now. A sort of silent consensus dominates the scene: fundamentally, Wittgenstein gets engaged in the traditional metaphysical dispute on essentialism (or ‘universals’), and claims, against essentialism, that there is no essence, no common property, no definition of games. The anti-essentialist interpretation is widely spread among scholars and constitutes, in fact, the standard reading of the family resemblance point<sup>4</sup>. However, in addition to the overt anti-essentialist position, H. –J. Glock’s *Wittgenstein Dictionary* (1996: 120-2) records a different interpretation of these passages. According to this second reading, more caution in attributing such straightforward anti-essentialist tenets to Wittgenstein is recommended. Baker’s and Hacker’s *Analytical Commentary* (1992:131) and O. Hanfling’s *Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy* (1989:67), for example<sup>5</sup>, cast doubts on the first reading, arguing that Wittgenstein’s point is not that words lack essentialist definitions. Rather, the point of the family resemblance passages is that words *need not* have essentialist definitions (capturing common properties) in order to function as words.

In what follows I reexamine these two readings and I sketch a new approach to the family resemblance sections. More specifically, I maintain that the first reading (straightforwardly anti-essentialist) is at best simplistic and should be rejected; although I agree in spirit with the second reading, I shall argue for a revision of it. This revision consists in proposing a more precise formulation of Wittgenstein’s point. The primary virtue of this new formulation is that it explicitly rules out a certain interpretation of the second reading, interpretation according to which this reading is highly misleading. My reading is neutral with respect to essentialism and, in a sense to be explained, is weaker than the first two interpretations; yet, Wittgenstein’s point, as I’ll reconstruct it here, remains considerably strong. On my account, the family resemblance idea is not meant to reject essentialism, but to render this doctrine irrelevant, by dissipating its phi-

---

<sup>4</sup> See, for example Pitcher (1964), Bambrough (1966), Malcolm (1986: 236-7), Ackerman (1988: 82-3), Rundle (1990: 41), Jaquette, (1998: 241-52), Lugg (2000: 115). The list could be much longer.

<sup>5</sup> Kenny (1973: 163) reads the passages this way as well.

losophical force. The role of these sections can be better understood in light of the provocative aim of Wittgenstein's philosophical method, as stated (for instance) at PI 133: "[t]he philosophical problems" - associated with essentialism in this case, "should *completely* disappear".

On my account then, the apparently well-understood family resemblance point should be read in a metaphilosophical key. Part of my project in this paper is to challenge the almost unanimous opinion according to which Wittgenstein's metaphilosophical views are rather incoherent, or even mistaken altogether. Highly idiosyncratic, his views on the therapeutic nature of philosophy are considered "the weakest part of Wittgenstein's later work – slogans unsupported by argument (...), which can be isolated from the rest"<sup>6</sup>. I maintain that these characterizations should be resisted; to the extent that my account of Wittgenstein's position on essentialism is convincing, it can render the connection between what he is doing and what he is saying about what he is doing (his aims and methods) more perspicuous.

### *The first interpretation*

Traditionally, essentialism claims that things have two different kinds of properties: some of them are essential, and the object must possess them to be what it is, while others are just accidental. Unlike recent essentialist doctrines (which employ the tools of various systems of modal logic to distinguish between different kinds of necessity statements<sup>7</sup>), traditional essentialism illustrates the "definitional conception of essence"<sup>8</sup>. According to this type of essentialism, the essential properties (which, when put together, presumably constitute *the* essence) of a term T are captured by the *analytical definition* of 'T'. The definition mentions those properties that are both necessary and sufficient for T to be what it is. A good example (not surprisingly found in a formal language) can be the analytical definition of 'even number': for every n, n is an even number if and only if (n is a natural number and n can be divided by 2). As it is evident, however, Wittgenstein's discussions in PI 65-71 are related to definitional essential-

---

<sup>6</sup> As H. – J. Glock records in (1996: 294)

<sup>7</sup> One well-known distinction I have in mind here is, of course, between necessity *de dicto* vs. necessity *de re*. Another is between necessary properties as applied to individuals vs. applied to kinds. None of them plays any role in this paper.

<sup>8</sup> For the distinction between the definitional and the modal conceptions of essence see Yablo (1998).

ism, since he repeatedly addresses issues concerning the definition of a concept. For this reason, I shall discuss here only this version of essentialism<sup>9</sup>. To begin with, let me outline three interpretations of Wittgenstein's view on definitional essentialism I focus on in this paper.

Assuming that the target of PI 65-67 is definitional essentialism (there is a common feature, a definition of games), the first interpretation summarizes the anti-essentialist reading, straightforwardly denying definitional essentialism:

(1) There is no analytic (essentialist) definition that captures the common feature ('essence') of games.

Hanfling (1989: 67, 2002: 90) and Baker and Hacker (1992: 131) read the family resemblance point in PI differently:

(2) A concept-word like 'game' does not need an essentialist definition of games in order for speakers to apply 'game' correctly.

The third reading will be argued for in this paper:

(3) Speakers do not need to know an essentialist definition of games in order to apply 'game' correctly.

A few preliminary remarks on these three readings are in order. The first, straightforward anti-essentialist interpretation takes (1) to be Wittgenstein's point in the family resemblances passages. I'm going to reject this view. Thesis (2) outlines the second reading and, although I'm rather sympathetic to it, I'll argue that it can be misleading. I propose (3) as expressing Wittgenstein's point in the family resemblance passages.

Proposition (1) is what is usually called an ontological thesis. It is a thesis about the (non)existence of an essential, common property. Proposition (3) is, of course, not an ontological thesis; it is rather an *epistemological* point. It tells us about what speakers need to know in order to use a word. As I'll argue, (3) is meant as a *description* with a significant philosophical (therapeutic) relevance. In order to confirm its accuracy, we have to look at the use of words and examine what speakers do when they apply them. Nevertheless, it may be misleading to speak here about confirmation

---

<sup>9</sup> Note that I do not address in this paper Wittgenstein's very important claim in PI 371, 'Essence is expressed by grammar'.

or refutation, since, as we shall see, thesis (3) is not meant as a (scientific) hypothesis. Let me address the first interpretation now. The next section will be devoted to the second reading.

As noted, commentators do not usually distinguish between theses (1), (2) and (3) and claim that Wittgenstein advanced the first thesis. A recent sample of this reading is D. Jacquette:

Wittgenstein illustrates the failure of essentialist definitions to identify the essence of the concept game (...). The class of things we call 'games' is so diverse and open-ended that we cannot arrive at any common set of distinguishing properties. (1998: 241)

After quoting PI 66, Jacquette goes on and points out what he believes is Wittgenstein's underlying point:

The empiricism of Wittgenstein's later philosophy is evident. Wittgenstein enjoins us to look at the world in order to decide whether or not an essentialist definition of the concept game is possible. (1998: 242)

Although Jacquette's emphasis on a certain empirical aspect in Wittgenstein's strategy is not completely beside the point (I shall clarify later why this point about Wittgenstein's empiricism is still ambiguous), an obvious objection plagues this reading. If Wittgenstein's thesis were (1) - the ontological one, then Wittgenstein's empirical procedure ('to look and see') was not appropriate for supporting a thesis like that. If one looks for the essence of games, for a definition of games, and one does not find them, then this failure proves nothing. If one does not find what one looks for, then there are always two explanations of the failure: either there is nothing to be found indeed *or* one does not look at the right places in the right way. Why should essence be that kind of thing that could be found by following the method proposed by Wittgenstein – by 'looking and seeing'?

It is hard to believe, then, that the method Wittgenstein seems to advance here, namely to *look* at how things *are* and then take note, *describe* what we actually *see*, can produce any persuasive outcome. I emphasize this point because this objection is directly relevant to one of his main metaphilosophical thesis, according to which "philosophy really *is* purely descriptive" (BB: 18), hence "we must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place" (PI 109). As the above objection shows, by proceeding in light of these claims, Wittgenstein cannot yield any philosophically convincing result, hence the almost unanimous dis-

missing attitude toward these views. However, as I'll argue, these views on the philosophical virtues of descriptions deserve, in fact, much more credit when put in relation to a correct interpretation of these passages.

I think then (as Baker and Hacker claim too<sup>10</sup>) that the above objection is very convincing; moreover, no textual evidence exists to the effect that Wittgenstein answers it, although he is aware of it. In (BB: 18, 35), for instance, he warns that, due to her following the method of the natural sciences, the essentialist tends to think that a question such as "What is the definition of 'game'?" has the same status as a scientific question. When the essentialist is faced with the failure of finding a common feature of games (to be captured in a definition), she replies that, as it often happens with some scientific questions, no answer has been discovered *yet*. And, if no definition has been formulated yet, it simply doesn't follow that a definition does not exist. This simple reasoning should be enough to show that, if Wittgenstein were to hold (1), then this would be a very weakly supported claim, worth of little philosophical interest.

### *The second interpretation*

I argued that one misleading way to read Wittgenstein's family resemblance point in PI was to claim that he endorses thesis (1), thus failing to distinguish between theses (1), (2) and (3). As I noted earlier, Baker and Hacker (1992) and Hanfling (1989, 2002) dismiss thesis (1) as capturing Wittgenstein's point. According to Baker and Hacker (1992: 131) the correct reading is as follows:

[Wittgenstein refutes] the philosophical dogma that a concept-word is correctly applied to each of a set of objects *only if* these share some common feature in virtue of which they fall under this concept. (Italics added)

Hanfling's reading highlights the contrast with the first anti-essentialist reading (1989: 67):

---

<sup>10</sup> Baker and Hacker (1992: 131) write: "Does Wittgenstein prove there is *nothing* common to all games? That we can *never* discover a common property? By running through various kinds of games, he marshals inductive support for this negative existential statement but might it not be refuted by a more penetrating analysis of games? His claim seems precarious, but also unnecessarily strong."

The crucial issue is not whether words have (...) an essentialist definition, but whether they *must* have one, in order to function as words. It is the second claim that Wittgenstein denies<sup>11</sup>.

The two passages above outline a different reading of Wittgenstein's point, summarized in Hanfling's (2002: 90) statement:

[T]here *need* not be... such set of conditions [an analytic definition] (...). [A] word can function perfectly well without this support.

On my understanding of their views, Hanfling, Baker and Hacker seem to think that Wittgenstein's point is thesis (2), outlined above, which amounts to this:

(2) It is not necessary that a concept-word have an essentialist definition in order for speakers to apply that concept-word correctly.

Or equivalently: we can find (some) words that lack essentialist definitions (since things lack common, essential features to be captured by these definitions); however, despite that, speakers use them correctly.

Several remarks are in order. Note, first, that this reading is a serious improvement to the simplistic thesis (1). Thesis (2) emphasizes not only the lack of an essential feature (as thesis (1) does), but also *the role* this feature is meant to play in the use of the word. The Baker-Hacker-Hanfling interpretation correctly underscores the crucial aspect here, namely that Wittgenstein does not merely and dogmatically deny the existence of a common feature. In his view, this denial should not be separated from the role this feature is meant to play in speakers' use – to “make us use the same word for all” (PI 65). This second reading illustrates the fact that the role assigned to the *use* of the word is fundamental for the later Wittgenstein's philosophical methodology.

My main concern about this reading is that, despite the new and correct emphasis on use, it may not completely succeed in avoiding the misleading suggestions made by thesis (1). This is apparent when we interpret thesis (2) as follows. A defender of thesis (2) has to present some cases in which both clauses present in thesis (2) hold, namely:

---

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Glock (1996: 121) remarks: “[The] qualms about the claim that games have no common defining characteristics [see footnote 11] leave intact the more modest claim that they *need not* have any such thing in common [on account of which speakers apply the word ‘game’].”

- (i) to present some words that lack essentialist definitions (or, equivalently, a class of things that lack a common, essential feature)

and

- (ii) to show that speakers can use those words even in these circumstances.

Games serve here as an example satisfying both these clauses.

Let me note two things about clause (i). First, clause (i) is equivalent with thesis (1) and, for this reason, thesis (2) presupposes thesis (1). Second, clause (ii) is subaltern to clause (i): thesis (2) reads, in fact, “it is possible that (some) words lack essentialist definitions and, *even in these circumstances*, speakers can apply them correctly”. However, clause (i) is, as we saw, very problematic. No proof can be convincing for the essentialist: even if nobody has found a definition of ‘game’ yet, this does not prove that a definition does not exist or won’t be found in the future. If no way to defend a clause like (i) is available, then, in so far as thesis (2) presupposes it, no strategy to defend thesis (2) can be very promising as well.

Therefore, despite its merits, thesis (2) seems to pose the same difficulties as thesis (1); hence its defense is no less problematic. These difficulties stem from the fact that one’s commitment to thesis (2) appears to entail one’s commitment to clause (i). To be sure, I’m not claiming that Hanfling, Baker and Hacker have intended this entailment<sup>12</sup>. Yet I’m claiming that thesis (2) is ambiguous; as it stands, an interpretation of thesis (2) is possible that suggests this problematic entailment. Consequently, precautions should be taken to the effect that the above interpretation (involving clause (i)) is ruled out.

As I suggested when I motivated my proposal of thesis (3), my view is that Wittgenstein *does not even address* thesis (1); he simply does not engage in a dispute over it. Moreover, as we’ll see, the interesting philosophical point he makes in those passages does not depend on his direct refutation of definitional essentialism. My reading is slightly different, being captured by the following thesis (put in a form similar to thesis (2) but equivalent to thesis (3) above):

---

<sup>12</sup> Hanfling confessed (in personal correspondence) that his intentions were along the lines of thesis (3). He denied any relevant difference between thesis (2) and (3).



(3) It is not necessary that *speakers know* essentialist definitions in order to apply words correctly.

Or, equivalently: even if the speakers don't know the essentialist definition of a word, they are nevertheless able to use it correctly. I assent, therefore, to a revised version of the second reading. In Hanfling's case, my reading runs like this: a word can function perfectly well without speakers knowing how to formulate its definition<sup>13</sup>. In the Baker-Hacker version, the modification I propose is similar. Their point should be understood as follows. The philosophical dogma that Wittgenstein refutes is that a concept-word can be correctly applied to each of a set of objects only if speakers know the common feature shared by these objects, in virtue of which they fall under this concept. I thus maintain that Wittgenstein's concern is not related to what must be (objectively?) true about *concepts* - namely, that their use is conditioned by their having an essentialist definition, but to what *speakers* actually know in order to use them. My proposal restraints the second reading to what is accessible to speakers; it also explicitly rejects the suggestion that Wittgenstein held a sort of substantial (negative) thesis about how the relation between language and world ('there is no definition of games') is reflected in speakers' linguistic behavior ('despite that, speakers can use the concept').

Thesis (3) is, however, weaker than thesis(1), since (1) entails (3) and (3) does not entail (1). If, in some cases, ('objectively') there is no definition of a concept (i.e. 1), then, obviously, speakers cannot know it, hence it cannot be the case that to know the definition is necessary for the correct use of the concept (i.e. 3). But this entailment raises no difficulties, since thesis (3) is not defended on the basis of (1). Thesis (3), as we saw, is not inferred from a prior proposition, rather it is endorsed by descriptions of the speakers' linguistic behavior. On the other hand, (3) contains no reference to what is, so to speak, 'objectively' the case as regards the existence of definitions. Essentialist definitions may or may not exist, thesis (3) remains silent on that; it just states that knowledge of definitions is not mandatory for a correct usage. That is, (3) neither entails nor contradicts (1), i.e. the truth of (3) does not rely on (1). (Although (1) entails (3), if (1) is false, (3) can still be true.) Although (2) makes a statement with respect

---

<sup>13</sup> Naturally, this is not to say that speakers can use a natural language word without being able to offer any justifications (such as clues, resemblances etc.) as to why this use is appropriate. What is denied is the knowledge of a specific definition such as that available for formal concepts like 'prime number' or 'denumerable set'.

to the role the (existence of the) definitions play for speakers, the defense of thesis (3), unlike that of thesis (2), does not involve thesis (1). (We saw that according to the interpretation I sketched above thesis (1), being equivalent to clause (i), is in fact part of thesis (2).)

Summing up, the main gain in accepting thesis (3) as the correct interpretation of the family resemblance point is that the 'defense' of thesis (3), unlike that of thesis (2), makes no appeal to the validity of thesis (1). Thesis (3) possesses then a virtue that (a certain interpretation of) thesis (2) is lacking, namely the independence from the highly problematic thesis (1). Whether or not thesis (1) is true or false, what thesis (3) says is still valid. Thus, thesis (3) is *neutral* with respect to thesis (1). Note, however, that although (3) does not reject essentialism, the effect of (3) on it is no less philosophically relevant: (3) says the existence of a common feature has *no function* in our use of the word.

As I see it, Wittgenstein's main point is – no surprise - about speakers' *use* of words. He wants us cured of the assumption that there must be a requirement imposed on us, on speakers, requirement consisting in being able to point out to the essence of games while we use the term 'game' correctly. In the reading I advance here, the role of use is emphasized in the second clause of thesis (3): first, speakers don't know the definition; second, they use the word correctly. As Wittgenstein urges frequently, by paying attention to speakers' everyday use of natural language concepts we can see that we do not feel, in fact, the pressure of the requirement to be able to identify a common feature while we use the terms correctly. It first looks like we do need to meet this requirement. Yet, when we *really* look at our everyday use, we discover that we ought not feel, in fact, this need. (As Wittgenstein says somewhere, it is not "our real need"<sup>14</sup>). The essentialist argues that the requirement 'objectively' exists, and she, *qua* metaphysician, feels its constraint, its (metaphysical) pressure. Despite that, natural language speakers (including the essentialist *qua* speaker of everyday language) can confess that they do not feel the pressure of the requirement in the everyday use of words, since speakers do not need to identify a common feature in order to use the term 'game' (for instance) correctly. Thus, by looking at use in a certain way, we ought to discover – Wittgenstein urges - that this pressure has a curious status: it is like a need that we,

---

<sup>14</sup> This is the sense in which I take Stanley Cavell's (1979: 187) point: "But I think that all that the idea of "family resemblances" is meant to do (...) is to make us dissatisfied with the idea of universals as explanations of (...) how a word can refer to this and that and that other thing, to suggest that it fails to meet 'our real need'."

as speakers of natural languages, do not feel. Therefore, we should ignore this supposed requirement, we can dispense with concerning about it. When this happens, to use Wittgenstein's own terms, the 'therapy' succeeds, we do not feel that 'metaphysical' pressure anymore.

*More on the proposed interpretation*

Following Hanfling, and Baker and Hacker, I concluded that it is very implausible that thesis (1) expresses Wittgenstein's point. Nevertheless, the second reading inherits the difficulties of the first interpretation (thesis 1) since thesis (2) assumes thesis (1) in the form of clause (i). I proposed thesis (3) as a revision of this second interpretation, thus trying to explicitly emphasize the crucial role *speakers' (everyday) use* of the words has in Wittgenstein's view. Now I make a few more remarks on the nature of thesis (3) and on how it squares with later Wittgenstein's overall (meta)philosophical views.

Characteristically, Wittgenstein's main strategy to defend thesis (3) consists in asking us to pay attention to 'what is going on' when we use a word. It is this concern, I contend, that gets addressed in the family resemblance passages too. Like in many other places throughout PI, Wittgenstein's main point in directing our attention toward this aspect is to make us realize that there is nothing that constantly and mysteriously *accompanies* our use of a concept. As a matter of fact, we do not (unconsciously) identify a common feature of games and we do not have an essentialist definition in mind while we use the word 'game' correctly. Therefore, as a matter of *fact*, we need not identify some common feature when we use a word - that is exactly thesis (3).

It is worth noting that Wittgenstein's way to proceed in PI 66 is, in fact, an illustration of his overall philosophical strategy, summarized in PI 127: to assemble reminders for a particular purpose. (Note that this view belongs to the aforementioned group of idiosyncratic statements regarding the nature of philosophy as well). Specifically, he urges us to remind how we use the word 'game'. Did we identify the common feature in virtue of which we applied the word to card-games? Or to board-games? Did we appeal to any exact definition that would capture that common feature? His answer is definitely 'no'. Our approval of the description performed by thesis (3) is meant to be immediate: we really do not know any suitable definition of 'game', we simply cannot identify that feature; notwithstanding this, we can use the word appropriately. This makes his therapeutic

purpose clear: to render *visible* that we do not need to assume the (epistemic) burden of knowing the common feature when we apply the word correctly.

Let me add two points to clarify what kind of statement is proposition (3) and a third point to explain its genealogy. The first issue (perhaps only superficially problematic) is the fact that I capture Wittgenstein's position by formulating a sort of (philosophical) *thesis*. Given Wittgenstein's well known rejection of explanations and philosophical theses made clear in PI 128<sup>15</sup> my term seems to be at odds with his explicit dismissal. However, as I highlighted it earlier, thesis (3) should be read as a *description*, as a way to take note of what is familiar and simple, being always before our eyes (PI 129); hence the word 'thesis' should not worry us here<sup>16</sup>. This is not a thesis in the sense that it states something worth defending, worth explaining by adducing further empirical evidence. Thesis (3) is not worth defending since nobody challenges it. We all know that we do not use any definition when we apply words like 'game' correctly, therefore there is nothing special with the remark that we do not need such a definition. We all know that what regulates our use of words is the way we learn how to use them in childhood, through comparisons, analogies, small clues etc., that is, a complicated mixture of explicit and implicit indications.

Secondly, let me make a few remarks on the labels I used to characterize thesis (3), namely that it is a *description* of what actually goes on in use, making an epistemological point. Being a description of the actual use, it may seem it is an *empirical* point. While I fully endorse the first label – thesis (3) is a description - I used the second one just for convenience: to say that (3) is an empirical statement is misleading. Let me clarify this, thus trying to clarify what is wrong with the above Jacqueline's characterization of Wittgenstein's later philosophy as inspired by empiricism.

Wittgenstein does think that it is observations into "the workings of our language" that can support a thesis like (3). These workings are revealed in speakers' everyday linguistic practices. These practices are social practices, objects of empirical research for that matter. We do not infer the grammar of a concept from some prior principles, but learn language by getting involved in a number of paradigmatic situations of language use

---

<sup>15</sup> PI 128: "If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to question them, because everyone would agree to them."

<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, what should worry us here is that our crispy manner of presenting Wittgenstein's view (by advancing and analyzing some theses) is not consonant with the colloquial, self-questioning spirit of the

(naming, describing, asking, supposing etc.) within these practices. This is the point at which the alleged Wittgenstein's 'empiricism' enters the scene: his grammatical investigations focus on the *actual* linguistic practices. So, on one hand we can say Wittgenstein displays an overall 'empiricist' inclination in directing our attention toward inspecting our use of concepts, toward the actual fact that we do not know and we do not employ any definition when we use the word. On the other hand, Wittgenstein's point is not (as Jacquette claims) that empirical inspections of games confirm us they share no common feature. "To look at the world", as Jacquette put it (in the earlier quote), is, in this context, hopelessly ambiguous. Because our use is part of the world in the sense that it is not a fiction<sup>17</sup>, one may be mistakenly lead to think that Wittgenstein's 'looking at the use' can be subsumed to 'looking at the world', and thus conforms to the traditional empiricists doctrines<sup>18</sup>.

This last point can be made even clearer if we recall the main feature of empirical statements, the possibility of being refuted by further empirical findings. What thesis (3) claims is not meant to be an empirical statement in the sense that it may be overthrown by further empirical investigations. Thesis (3) does not even belong to the domain of scientific, empirical investigation since it is not a hypothesis that has to be tested, it does not reveal a *new* fact, a new property etc. as scientific discoveries usually do. It is a (supposedly philosophically illuminating) description (PI 109), open to everyone's approval; it does not require for that any special instruments or laboratories. What thesis (3) says has always been, is and will always be before everyone's eyes, in a way in which scientific discoveries are not. That thesis (3) is endorsed by straightforward remarks about how we use natural language is in agreement with its 'philosophical' relevance in Wittgenstein's account: "[Philosophical problems] are, of course, not empirical problems", but they can be solved "by looking into the workings of our language" (PI 109). Now it is worth pointing out that this is exactly what the strategy to 'defense' thesis (3) amounts to: to look into these workings and to describe how speakers use the word 'game'. We can make, of course, empirical investigations (linguistic-statistical, say) regarding which

---

*Investigations.*

<sup>17</sup> "We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language, not about some non-spatial, not temporal phantasm" (PI 108)

<sup>18</sup> Hanfling (2000, ch.4) challenges the application of usual classifications (empiricism, rationalism, idealism etc.) to Wittgenstein's views. He proposes the term "participatory knowledge" for the kind of knowledge one acquires when one learns a language.

features of games are considered the most characteristic for games by some categories of speakers. There might be neurological patterns associated with the use of a certain word; it might turn out that only certain parts of the brain contribute to processing certain concepts, so far and so on. But to claim that further empirical investigations can reveal that we *do* know a definition of games in spite of our denial (namely, that we do not know and do not use any definition when we apply words like ‘game’) is to get entangled in a form of conceptual confusion. Thesis (3) is a then description with therapeutic power<sup>19</sup>, apt to disperse this confusion.

Wittgenstein’s discussion of ‘unconscious pains’ in (BB: 22-23) can be recalled here to explain in what sense we speak about confusion here. It is the conventions that govern the correct uses of the word ‘pain’ (its ‘grammar’) that rule out as meaningless to say we are in pain when we do not feel any pain. The emphasis on ‘grammar’ here is meant to underscore that this is not an empirical discovery. A scientific (medical) discovery can reveal, for example, that we have internal wounds which are not painful, but no scientific discovery can reveal we have pains which we do not feel. This is so not because pains have some mysterious causal relations to what we feel (beyond what science can bring out), but because of the grammatical relation between concepts like ‘pain’ and ‘knowledge’. We can speak, of course, about ‘pains we do not know we have’ and say we have these kinds of pain, for example, in the aforementioned case when some internal wounds are not painful. Yet, as Wittgenstein notes in BB, to speak this way is just to introduce new *terminology*, a new concept of pain and not to discover a new empirical fact about pains (i.e., that they can be such that we do not know about them.)

By the same token, no scientific discovery can reveal that, in spite of the fact that we realize we do not know any definition<sup>20</sup>, we *do* know a definition when we apply the word ‘game’<sup>21</sup>. Like “We are not in pain if

---

<sup>19</sup> Recall one of Wittgenstein’s own conception of his enterprise: “Philosophy really *is* ‘purely descriptive’” (BB: 18).

<sup>20</sup> As we’ll see later on, Wittgenstein distinguishes between knowing of an essence of games and being able to capture it in words, by formulating a definition: speakers may know about an essence of games but it may turn out that it is ineffable: “it is only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is” (PI 69).

<sup>21</sup> Of course, nothing precludes a community of speakers to propose a definition of ‘game’ and follow it strictly. For such a proposal see PI 76 and Rundle’s (1990: 48) (amusing) proposal of the following fifty three-word definition: “games are rule-governed activities with an arbitrary and non-serious objective, an objective that is of little or no significance outside the game, but which we set ourselves to attain for the

we do not feel any pain”, “We know what is going on when we apply words”<sup>22</sup> is not a point about how knowledgeable speakers are, a piece of factual information to be confirmed or refuted by empirical research, but a grammatical point. So being, it makes no sense to ask whether or not this is an empirical generalization, a sort of inductive reasoning. Moreover, the wonder how could Wittgenstein think such a statement endorses thesis (3) is out of question. (“Did he ask all speakers how they use words like ‘game’?”)

Thesis (3) has then a grammatical status; it is established on the basis of *descriptions* of the way we use the words and it is meant to direct our attention toward what everybody already agrees on. It does not state anything new for speakers, it is not a hypothesis, a prediction, but it is prompted by grammatical remarks on our use of the words. Summing up, although Wittgenstein’s ‘grammatical’ remarks on the actual use of concepts are intended as descriptions of what is *actually* going on in language use (hence they can be called empirical in this sense), to speak about “the empiricism of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy” without any qualification is seriously misleading.

I close this section with a point about the genealogy of the reading I’m advocating here. My proposal of thesis (3) was prompted up by Backer’s and Hacker’s (1992: 131) insight that, “perhaps” Wittgenstein’s point may be different from, and weaker than, their thesis (2). They suggest that Wittgenstein’s point in PI 65 – 67 is that the practice of explaining the word ‘game’ does not mention any essentialist definition of game<sup>23</sup>. In short, Wittgenstein’s only concern would be to highlight the fact that in the practice of using a word like ‘game’ speakers do not explain it in the way the essentialist may expect. I am, again, sympathetic with this sugges-

---

sake of the fun or other satisfaction that is to be derived from participation in the activity and/or attainment of the objective”.

<sup>22</sup> The more general version of this proposition, “(Only) we know what is going on in our mind” is either a grammatical proposition, fixing (part of) the meaning of concepts like ‘knowledge’ or ‘mind’, or simply nonsensical, when viewed as a deep metaphysical truth (a piece of *a priori* knowledge). See PI, part II, p. 221e.

<sup>23</sup> Baker and Hacker (1992: 131) write: “Or perhaps [Wittgenstein needs] only [to] defend the still weaker thesis that the practice of explaining ‘game’ does not include singling out properties necessary for an activity to be a game”. As it stands, the final part of this statement is false, since Wittgenstein himself singles out what seems to be a property necessary to be a game, by calling games ‘proceedings’ (PI 66). Of course, since there are ‘proceedings’ which are not games, this is not a *sufficient* property to call something a ‘game’. For this remark see also H.-J Glock (1996: 121).

tion, even more than with thesis (2). However, if we ask *why* the practice of explaining ‘game’ does not mention any essentialist definition, any common feature, why speakers do not single out any such definition or feature, we can see that the answer to these questions is provided precisely by thesis (3): namely, because speakers do not know and do not need to know any such definition. The interpretation (3) is thus, I contend, more fundamental than their correct insight, in the sense that it is a thesis like (3) that can account of it. Speakers do not explain ‘game’ by giving the definition not because they are lazy or stupid, but because they do not know any definition. Thus, in my view, the Baker-Hacker insight is much more on the right track than their thesis (2).

### *Two arguments from textual consistency*

A good strategy to gain credit for the interpretation I propose here is to show that the objections Wittgenstein disputes with his imaginary interlocutor can be read as objections to the reading proposed by my interpretation. That is, given the reading I advance here, the interlocutor’s objections arise naturally. In this section I pursue this strategy and I discuss two such objections.

Interlocutor’s first objection runs as follows (in PI 69): even if we grant the point that speakers are not able to formulate a definition and explain ‘game’ by giving examples and by pointing to various resemblances, etc., it may not follow that they do not *know* that feature or definition. It might be that this essence is ineffable: it is “only other people whom we cannot tell exactly what a game is” while we do know what the essence of games is. Wittgenstein reconsiders this objection in PI 75; this objection challenges his assumption that speakers’ knowledge of what a game is is completely captured in the explanations they can offer.

I’ll address this objection below; before that, let me note that, according to PI 36, this move illustrates a way of proceeding highly characteristic to traditional metaphysics. The picture under whose spell we live indicates that *it must be* something (in this case, an essential feature) that we know and which *accompanies and supports* our use. However, when we question what we know when we use the word, we find nothing - that is, nothing physical, a common feature, to be captured in a definition. Then, because that picture holds us captive (PI 115) and dictates how we must see things, we postulate a *spirit*, something mental able to accompany and support the use of the word. The next step of this metaphysical *expla-*



*nation* is to suggest that we use this mental, spiritual, ineffable essence as a *guide* to our application of the word, despite the fact that we are not able to find a way to capture it in words, to make it *publicly* available.

In terms of how the text of PI flows, two substantial themes relevant for the first objection follow the family resemblance passages. First, we find Wittgenstein's analyses of what it means *to be guided* and second, his famous remarks about the impossibility of a private language. These points can be interpreted as addressing (not directly, but among other things) the above outlined objection. It does not serve my case here to delve into these two themes, but I count them as providing textual evidence that something like thesis (3) is what concerned in fact Wittgenstein in PI 65 - 67. This evidence is indirect in the sense that the acceptance of thesis (3) doesn't throw light on the difficulties posed by the celebrated 'argument' against the private language<sup>24</sup> or on the interpretative puzzles involved in the discussion about guidance<sup>25</sup>. My point concerns only the consistency of my reading with what follows in the *Investigations*. If it is true that thesis (3) captures Wittgenstein's main point in PI 65-67, then we can see that these discussions follow naturally. Reading the family resemblance point as I suggest here may not help understand what Wittgenstein says about guidance and privacy, but it gives us a promising clue as to why he thought he had to address these topics.

Now I examine whether my reading is consistent with the paragraphs PI 70 and 71, in which Wittgenstein challenges what is usually called Frege's 'ideal' of the determinacy of meaning (Glock, 1996). (Roughly, this is the view that any concept acts similarly to a mathematical function, sorting out things into two perfectly determined categories, those that fall under it, and those that don't.) Consequently, a concept lacking these 'sharp boundaries' is, in fact, not a concept at all. Wittgenstein takes up this second objection and, in PI 71, asks: "[I]s a blurred concept a concept at all?" Formulating it in analogy with the line of thinking proposed by the thesis (2), the Fregean ideal/dogma states that a concept can function only if it has sharp boundaries. It seems then that the PI 71 question asks how the lack of an exact definition of a concept affects its application – or, at least this is the reading thesis (2) suggests.

---

<sup>24</sup> There is no such monolithic *argument*, in fact. See Canfield (2001) for a recent re-examination of the issue.

<sup>25</sup> See Wittgenstein's meticulous analysis of how we are guided by an arrow (PI 86), by somebody we are dancing with (PI 170, 172 - 190) or by a rule (PI 178) – for this last example, see Kripke's well-known (1982).

According to my interpretation, this is *not* what this question asks. This question should be read as asking how *speakers' lack of knowledge* of an exact definition affects their correct application of a concept. We are able to see this if we pay attention to the precise sense in which Wittgenstein challenges Frege's point. Very explicitly, he takes Frege's point to be that those concepts are rendered *unusable*: "This [the lack of sharp boundaries] presumably means that we cannot do anything with [them]" (PI 71). This remark is relevant since it shows that Wittgenstein does not start an investigation on the concepts themselves, as it were, but rather on speakers' use of them – that is, along the lines thesis (3) is developed. Moreover, in (BB: 19), in a passage ancestor to those in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein says: "the actual usage...has no sharp boundary". Once again, the use of concepts is in question<sup>26</sup>, and not concepts themselves, so to speak. His concern with blurred concepts should then be understood in the following sense: how concepts blurred for speakers can have the use they have in speakers' linguistic practices? Concepts are blurred in the sense that it is speakers who do not have exact definitions for them; it is specifically this aspect makes the Fregean suspect we cannot use them.

The reasoning I'm pursuing here is similar to the one I advanced when I distinguished between theses (1) and (2) on one hand, and thesis (3) on the other. Wittgenstein cannot be taken to address the issue of 'blurred concepts' *simpliciter* (where 'blurred' means 'not having exact definitions'), since he did not (and cannot) prove that definitions do not exist. Given that he could draw no conclusion about the very existence of essentialist definitions, it is unreasonable to think that he is developing his thoughts by assuming this conclusion and asking: "How can speakers use the word 'game' correctly if (as we showed) there is no definition of games". This is so because he did not show, in fact, that there are no definitions. All that his descriptive method was able to accomplish was to make us realize that we do not know any definition. Therefore, I contend the correct interpretation of what is asked here is along the following line: "How can speakers use the word 'game' correctly, if (as we saw) speakers know no (and need not know) definition of games?"

Given Frege's view of language as calculus and thesis (3) (that speakers do not need to know exact definitions to use words *correctly*), the question 'how is this possible?' crops up naturally: in any calculation problem the emphasis naturally falls on the correctness of what people do. So,

---

<sup>26</sup> O. Hanfling pointed out to me (personal communication) that 'usage' might not be interchangeable with 'use'. However, I assume they are synonyms.

the second question-objection (“[I]s a blurred concept a concept at all?”) asks whether or not we can do anything with these concepts. If we cannot identify any ‘sharp boundaries’, then, the query is, how do we distinguish between correct and incorrect uses of words, how do we *justify* our application of concepts? Although we saw that those concepts are not rendered unusable (by inspecting the practice of using them), the confusion still persists: how is any *successful* use possible if we do not master exact definitions of (some) concepts? As it is known, from here Wittgenstein goes on by analyzing the very idea of exactness, and, more generally, the assumption that natural language can be assimilated to a system of calculus. However, following Wittgenstein’s answers on these topics is beyond the scope of this paper.

### *Conclusion*

In my reading, Wittgenstein’s main target in the family resemblance passages is not the straightforward essentialist thesis ‘there is an essence of games (captured in the analytical definition)’, but, specifically, a view like ‘speakers need to know a definition / essence in order to apply the term correctly’. My reading of these passages is along the lines of thesis (3), and it is meant to dismiss this later view. Descriptions of the use of language show that speakers do not know any definition, any essence of games when they apply the term ‘game’ correctly. Therefore, no knowledge of such essentialist definition is necessary for the correct application of a word. The intended effect of thesis (3) on the nucleus of traditional essentialism is not rejection, but, so to speak, dissolution. Essentialism’s supposed foundational force should be neutralized, since essentialist definitions do not have any function in our use of a natural language concept. As Wittgenstein used to say, they are like cogs disconnected from the mechanism.

In light of this reading, Wittgenstein’s famous view on the intended effects of his philosophical method should look less dogmatic. We begin to understand how and why the philosophical problems associated with (definitional) essentialism should “*completely disappear*” (PI 133). The conclusion regarding the dissolution of the philosophical force of essentialism bears directly on what is usually taken to be the relevance and the aim of traditional metaphysics, to provide us with *foundational* results, with discoveries about the very nature of reality. When we recognize that our use of language is independent of what such enterprise may unearth (if anything), the relevance the metaphysician invokes for her inquiry into the na-

ture of things vanishes. For Wittgenstein, philosophers' claim to provide conceptual foundations (in the sense of supplying foundational justifications for our use of concepts) is simply an illusion. Good philosophy leaves everything as it is, bad philosophy strives for foundations. When these foundations are believed to be found, the immediate consequence is that (bad) philosophy proposes linguistic reforms, thus interfering with the actual usage of natural language concepts (PI 124).

## REFERENCES

- Ackerman, R. J. (1988) *Wittgenstein's City*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press
- Baker, G., Hacker, P. M. S. (1992) *An Analytical Commentary on Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*. vol. 1. Oxford: Blackwell
- Bambrough, R. (1966) 'Universals and Family Resemblances' in G. Pitcher (ed.) *Wittgenstein. The Philosophical Investigations*. NY: Anchor Books
- Canfield, J. V. (2001) 'Private language: The diary Case' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79, 3 pp. 377-94
- Cavell, S. (1979) *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Glock, H.-J.(1996) *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Hanfling, O. (1989) *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY Press
- (2000) *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*. London and NY: Routledge
- (2002) *Wittgenstein and the Human Form of Life*. London: Routledge
- Jacquette, D. (1998) *Wittgenstein's Thought in Transition*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press
- Kenny, A. (1973) *Wittgenstein*. London: Penguin
- Lugg, A. (2000) *Wittgenstein's Investigations 1 – 133*. London and NY: Routledge
- Malcolm, N. (1986) *Nothing is Hidden*. Oxford: Blackwell
-

- Pitcher, G. (1965) 'The Attack on Essentialism' in G. Pitcher *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*. Reprinted in J. Canfield (ed.) *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (vol. 5 Method and Essence) New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1986
- Rundle, B. (1990) *Wittgenstein and Contemporary Philosophy of Language*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophische Untersuchungen / Philosophical Investigations*. (Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe) Oxford: Blackwell
- (1974) *Philosophical Grammar*. Part I. (translated by A. Kenny, edited by R. Rhees) Oxford: Blackwell
- (1964, first ed. 1958) *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Blackwell
- (1979) *Wittgenstein 's Lectures, Cambridge 1932-1935, from the notes of Alice Ambrose and Margaret MacDonald*, ed. A. Ambrose Oxford: Blackwell
- (1967) *Zettel*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press
- Yablo, S. (1998) 'Essentialism' in E. Craig, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, version 2.0.
-