

Did Wittgenstein solve the problem of universals?

By Neil Webb

Introduction

In May 1961 Renford Bambrough presented a paper entitled "Universals and Family Resemblances". The paper begins with the very bold statement that, "I believe that Wittgenstein solved what is known as the problem of universals".¹

Bambrough acknowledged that he did not expect most other philosophers to accept that claim.

In this talk I would like to highlight what I consider to be the main arguments and then try and identify where I think that leaves us - in particular do we journey with Bambrough to his conclusion or are there areas where doubt remains?

Disclaimer

I do want to begin with something of a disclaimer. Firstly I am no expert on Wittgenstein, and the problem of universals is one the most intractable and difficult in the philosophical literature. In the talk that follows I am not providing any original scholarship but am using the paper presented by Bambrough to consider a possible response to the problem of universals which will hopefully spark discussion. I see myself as providing a very basic road map and acknowledge that there will be many in the audience who are already very familiar with the territory.

When I suggested the title of the talk to Frank he mentioned in email correspondence that he was taught by Bambrough at Cambridge and so I hope we can call upon Frank's knowledge of Bambrough's position in the discussion that follows.

Also by coincidence I have recently been undertaking a one-off course in philosophy just for the fun of it with the Open University. Their library catalogue showed that they had an old Open University programme which interviewed Bambrough on the subject of Universals. The Library very kindly made a copy of the programme available for me, and so I have been able to use that to inform this talk.

The beginning - why does Bambrough think that Wittgenstein solved the problem of universals?

The answer to this is very much tied up to the views of the later Wittgenstein and in particular his account of meaning and understanding. At no point does Wittgenstein explicitly state that he is dealing with the problem of universals but Bambrough believes if we accept a Wittgensteinian account of meaning and understanding we are led to the conclusion that the problem of universals has been solved - or perhaps it is better to say *dissolved*.

The Key passages for Bambrough are Wittgenstein's remarks on - "Family Resemblances" - Firstly some comments in the Blue Book.

In here Wittgenstein talks about our desire to look for something in common to all the entities that we subsume under a general term. If we classify something as a game then we are tempted to think there must be a common property which all games have that allow us to correctly call something a game.

Furthermore we are tempted to think that if we have learnt a general term, say the term "leaf", we have a general picture of what a leaf is. "... we are inclined to think that the general idea of a leaf is something like a visual image, but one which only contains what is common to all leaves...This is

again connected with the idea that the meaning of a word is an image, or a thing correlated to a word."²

As we know, the later Wittgenstein does not consider this to be the correct account of meaning and understanding and he develops his ideas on family resemblance in a famous section of the *Philosophical Investigations*.³

I have printed out an excerpt and I do want us to read through this short passage because it is central to understanding Wittgenstein's approach.

"66. Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: 'There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games' '—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ballgames, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. —Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear. And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.

67. I can think of no better expression to characterise 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"

Bambrough thinks that we can more formally put Wittgenstein's point by considering how we subsume a word under a general term based on their possession of general features.

We can imagine say 5 objects - (a) to (e) each of which has four properties out of five [In capital letters] A, B, C, D, E.

Bambrough thinks that while it may be the case that 5 of the objects have a property in common (say property B) the point is that "it is clear that it is not in virtue of the presence of B that they are rightly called by the same name...since the name also applies to possible instances that lack the feature or features."⁴

Bambrough goes on to ask us to consider an actual family say the Churchill family and he suggests that while they may have various commonalities which strike us when we see a family photograph - high forehead, bushy eyebrows, blue eyes etc there may be no common feature which applies to them all.

Our philosophical craving is to be able to articulate the necessary and sufficient conditions for an object to correctly be subsumed under a general term, but Wittgenstein's insight is to acknowledge the temptation and the desire to do this but to suggest that it is just not how language works. And here we have an echo of Wittgenstein's remark that philosophical problems - and the problem of universals may be viewed as an exemplar of such a problem - arise when language goes on holiday.⁵

Bambrough's contention is that the analysis provided in relation to games can be extended elsewhere and is the key to seeing how the problem of universals can be dissolved/resolved. He points out that Wittgenstein did not confront head on scholarship which discussed the "problem of universals" but nonetheless the foundations are there for the way to deal with the issue.

Bambrough considers with what Wittgenstein could be said to be contrasting games when he provides his analysis, and the three answers he suggests are language, propositions and understanding.

Bambrough notes that A J Ayer contrasts the word "game" with the word "red" on the basis that former does not and the latter does "mark a simple and straightforward resemblance". Ayer appears to concede validity in Wittgenstein's argument, but tries to restrict its scope "The point which Wittgenstein's argument brings out is that the resemblance between the things to which the same word applies may be of different degrees. It may be looser and less straightforward in some cases than in others."⁶

So Ayer is suggesting that we can have clear cut examples and much vaguer and less precise examples of objects which resemble one another. Game being a looser concept and red being a more precise term.

However Bambrough cites other comments from Wittgenstein which have a bearing on Ayer's remarks

"Can you tell me what is in common between a light red and a dark red?" (*The Brown Book* P.131)

and in the *Philosophical Investigations* (section 73) he asks

"Which shade is the 'sample in my mind' of the colour green - the sample of what is common to all shades of green?"

Bambrough is suggesting that even with what Ayer takes to be a straightforward case of resemblance - such as with colour - the same conclusion holds.

"Just as cricket and chess and patience and ring-a-ring-a-roses have nothing in common *except that they are games* so poppies and blood and pillar boxes and hunting coats have nothing in common *except that they are red.*"⁷

Special Status of Universals

Bambrough notes John Wisdom's observation that often when philosophers undertake philosophical analysis they are comparing and contrasting different types of propositions -

Propositions about minds compared with propositions about bodies.

Propositions of logic with compared propositions about matters of fact.

Propositions about the present compared with propositions of the past or the future.

"whereas propositions involving universals cannot be compared or contrasted with propositions which do not involve universals since all propositions involve universals."⁸

Bambrough thinks that philosophers can see the force of the argument that Wittgenstein has outlined in say his description of what is a game - the passage we looked at earlier - but the temptation is to view this as an exception.

Effectively to concede that in the case of game there might not be anything in common that justifies us calling something a game but to believe that this is not how things *usually* work- "...they treat Wittgenstein's examples as special cases, as rogues and vagabonds in the realm of concepts, to be contrasted with the general run of law-abiding concepts which do mark the presence of common elements in their instances."⁹

Back to the earlier example we have Ayer conceding the point in relation to games but trying to preserve the status quo with concepts such as the colour red.

Central Point

Bambrough says if we see a number of books or a number of chairs and are asked what it is that they all have in common - we will naturally look to see some connecting feature. Common ownership, common manufacturer, common subject in the case of the books.

"It will never occur to you to say that the books have in common that they are all books or that the chairs are all chairs." ¹⁰

We would just see such a reply to be trite and a poor joke.

But in relation to the question what do **all** books or **all** chairs have in common the answer is indeed that they are all books or they all chairs - "and this time it is not a joke but an important philosophical truth."¹¹

The Wittgenstein position in the debate on Universals

In terms of positions regarding the problem of Universals Bambrough believes that Wittgenstein's approach is neither that of a realist or a nominalist although it shares aspects of both.

Both the nominalist and the realist agree that there can be no objective justification for the application of a general term to its instances unless its instances have something in common over and above them simply being instances of the general term.

The nominalist does not believe that there is any such general element and the realist believes that there **must** be some additional common element.

According to Bambrough Wittgenstein denied this assumption and this gives rise to his resolution of the problem of universal.

"The nominalist says that games have nothing in common except that they are all called games.

"The realist says that games must have something in common, and he means by this that they must have something in common other than that they are games.

"Wittgenstein says that games have nothing in common except that they are games" ¹²

Application of Wittgenstein's insights

To illustrate the application of Wittgenstein's thought on family resemblance I would like us to consider a famous tax case involving, would you believe, McVitie's Jaffa Cakes - the question that went for legal determination was whether Jaffa Cakes are Cakes or Biscuits?

I am sure that everyone is familiar with Jaffa Cakes, but as a reminder I have brought some along and would like you to consider the question of whether it is a cake or biscuit before you eat it.

The reason why the determination was important was that higher tax had to be paid to the Her Majesties Revenue and Customs if they were biscuits, and so the tax authorities were pressing for that view to be upheld by a tax tribunal.

The case was adjudicated on by Mr D C Potter QC, who in a very careful judgement looked at all the key factors which could determine whether a Jaffa Cake should be said to be a biscuit or a cake. The summary judgment is available on Professor Tim Crane's website (<http://www.timcrane.com/jaffa-cakes.html>) and I have printed off a copy of the summary judgement.

"I now list the facts and considerations that I have taken into account in arriving at my decision.

1. **Name.** This is a very minor consideration indeed.
2. **Ingredients.** Cakes differ widely, from at one end sponge cakes, at the other Christmas cakes, which may appear to have little in common. However the ingredients of the sponge part of the Jaffa Cake are virtually the same as the ingredients of a traditional sponge cake. Egg, flour and sugar are kneaded together, and the result is aerated. The sponge-cake part of a Jaffa Cake is in itself "cake".
3. **Texture.** Reference was made by the witness Mr Wood to texture, but he regarded visible texture as important; what I have in mind is the physical texture. Generally, I would expect a cake to be entirely or mainly soft and friable, not able to be snapped and not crisp. The Jaffa Cake has the texture of a sponge cake, which the brittleness of the chocolate does not displace.
4. **Size.** The Jaffa Cake is small, being a couple of inches across, substantially smaller than the average cake. Generally I would expect a biscuit to be smaller than a cake, and the size of a Jaffa Cake is typical of a biscuit and not typical of a cake.
5. **Packaging.** Jaffa Cakes are packaged in a way that I regard as "uncakelike". They are sold in packets of 3 or 6 or 12 or 24; in any event in cylindrical packets, much like Digestive biscuits, which packets are then contained in cardboard boxes. This factor clearly points against Jaffa Cakes being cakes.
6. **Marketing.** Generally, in supermarkets, where cakes and biscuits are found in separate places, Jaffa Cakes are found with biscuits and are not found with cakes. The buyer will be unlikely to find Jaffa Cakes on a cake counter.
7. The sponge part of a Jaffa Cake is made from a thin batter containing egg, flour and sugar, whereas most biscuits may be expected to be made from a rather thicker mixture that may be cut.

Generally cakes may be moulded from a thin batter whereas biscuits may not be moulded but cut. However, I do not regard this as an important factor.

8. A Jaffa Cake is moist to start with and in that resembles a cake and not a biscuit; with time it becomes stale, and last becomes hard and crisp; again like a cake and not like a biscuit. Generally I would expect a stale biscuit to have become soft.

9. Jaffa Cakes are presented, and accepted by the public, as being snacks, normally eaten with the fingers; whereas a cake, although sometimes eaten with the fingers, is normally to be found eaten from a plate, perhaps with a knife or pastry fork.

10. Jaffa Cakes may be expected to appeal particularly to children, who may consume one of them in one, possibly two, mouthfuls. In this respect it resembles a biscuit or a sweet.

11. The sponge-cake part is not simply a base for the jam and chocolate; it is a substantial part of the product, not in flavour, but in bulk and texture when eaten.

12. Generally, I come to the conclusion that Jaffa Cakes have characteristics of cakes, and also characteristics of biscuits or non-cakes. I conclude that they have sufficient characteristics of cakes to qualify as cakes within the meaning of item number 1 in group 1 of the fifth schedule. If it be relevant, I also determine that the Jaffa Cakes are not biscuits.

I therefore allow the appeal. The Appellants are at liberty to make an application in respect of costs."

You can see in this judgement all of the factors which were taken into account including name, ingredients, size, texture and marketing etc.

He concludes at point 12 with "Generally, I come to the conclusion that Jaffa Cakes have characteristics of cakes and also characteristics of biscuits or non-cakes. I conclude that they have sufficient characteristics of cakes to qualify as cakes within the meaning of item 1 in Group 1 of the fifth schedule. If it be relevant, I also determine that the Jaffa Cakes are not biscuits."

If you go to the BBC website and google "Cake or biscuit? Why Jaffa Cakes excite philosophers" you will see a BBC magazine article on 20 February 2017 in which Dave Edmonds discusses these matters in more detail when promoting a radio show where the issue was to be discussed on the BBC radio 4 programme "The Philosopher's Arms".

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-38985820>

Edmonds writes -

"We are tempted to think that every concept must have a strict definition to be useable. But Wittgenstein points out there are many "family resemblance" concepts, as he called them. Family members can look alike without sharing a single characteristic." [Edmonds then talks about how family member can look alike as we have discussed earlier and how games can have similarities but also fundamental differences - again as we have seen from the Wittgenstein passage we discussed earlier]

He concludes -

"And there is no strict definition of "cake" or "biscuit" that compels us to place Jaffa Cake under either category"

I think that conclusion is correct -What we have here is a puzzle-case at the perimeter and for formal legal purposes we allow someone to make a legal determination. However nobody is going to bat an eyelid or think someone mad or stupid if seeing a plate of Jaffa Cakes they say "Please can you pass me over one of those biscuits" rather than saying "Please can you pass me over one of those cakes".

Objections to Wittgenstein's view

In the Open University programme that I mentioned in the my opening remarks Godfrey Vesey acts as a sort of chairman in a discussion between Renford Bambrough and Stephan Kroner. Professor Kroner concedes the validity of much of what Wittgenstein says but wants to make clear that there are examples of concepts where the notion of family resemblance does not work.

He gives the examples of a number, say the numbers - 1, 7, 327 - and contends that as far as integers are concerned it does not help to suggest they fall under a family resemblance concept. The thought here is that we can give a formal definition of numbers and there are no blurred edges and loose connections in the way in which there is with other words. Whether something is an integer is clear cut - whether something is red will be blurred in many cases.

He also believes that it would be inappropriate to use the concept of family resemblance with notions such as "to the left of" or "greater than". If we say that such concepts have a family resemblance it does not take us further, whereas we *can* usefully say that they are transitive concept.

Kroner also makes the point that Wittgenstein does not deal with the fact that some concepts have continuous connections so that between red and non red there are common borderline cases.

The replies back to Kroner could be along the lines that either the points he makes can be taken to help extend the Wittgensteinian analysis, or I wonder if we might make a distinction between form and substance, and with matters such as logical concepts or numbers deploy Wittgenstein's remark that logic must take care of itself.¹³ You can't as it were step outside your own skin to justify reasoning and associated concepts because you simply end up assuming what you need to prove and would therefore be begging the question.

Wittgenstein's place in the history of the problem of universals

Socrates as we know asked challenging questions about the correct definition of many terms - he wanted a cast iron, concrete definition of various concepts and the assumption behind his questioning was that such a definition must be possible. Bambrough considers that the genius of Wittgenstein is to help us see that you can deploy a term without there having to be something that is common to all particulars of a given term other than simply that they are all instances.

Some closing remarks and questions

Wittgenstein's approach is to say that what makes something fall under a category is that that is how we proceed within a form of life. We move away from considerations of language as being potentially private and accept the fact that you require agreements in judgement. You certainly go from any notion of the subjective in accounting for meaning and understanding to the inter-subjective.

One question which to my mind remains is - are there limits to our categories - are categories arbitrary or are they sometimes constrained? I have in mind here the concept of Natural Kind terms and whether something can be said by science to be correctly classified or not. Alexander Bird in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy says,

"To say that a kind is *natural* is to say that it corresponds to a grouping that reflects the structure of the natural world rather than the interests and actions of human beings."

The sort of things that have been said to be Natural Kinds are Gold and Tigers and Lemons and Potassium. But it is highly contentious area as to whether there are indeed Natural Kinds, and if so what are the successful candidates.

I can see that potentially the existence of Natural Kinds could be a challenge for a Wittgensteinian account of Universals, but I then further wonder whether there may be a Wittgensteinian response that says -

any category is going to have a boundary, a perimeter and it will be arbitrary where we place it. Just how pure does a nugget have to be to still be called gold - Where exactly does one species end and another begin. While often the distinction between say a male and female is clear there are many cases in nature including within homo sapiens where that is not always the case.

Conclusion

I have to say that I find Wittgenstein's account of what a game is convincing and I can see how that can be extended to so many other cases including cakes and biscuits. What I am not sure about is whether the account is fully comprehensive, and if it isn't what the exceptions are and why. Perhaps now, over to the audience to help me with that question.

1 *Universals and Family Resemblances* - Renford Bambrough - From Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Vol. LXI (1960-61) Reprinted in *Wittgenstein - The Philosophical Investigations* Edited by George Pitcher - MacMillan 1968 . All Page numbers in this talk refer to the Pitcher version. (P.186).

2 Bambrough P. 187 is quoting from Wittgenstein's *Blue Book*.

3 *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein - 1958 Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe - Basil Blackwell Oxford.

4 Bambrough P. 189

5 *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein - 1958 Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe - Basil Blackwell Oxford. Section 38.

6 Bambrough P.193 - quoting from A J Ayer *The Problem of Knowledge* pp10-12.

7 Bambrough P.193

8 Bambrough P.195

9 Bambrough P.195

10 Bambrough P.197

11 Bambrough P.197

12 Bambrough P.198

13 *Notebooks 1914-1916* - 2nd Edition Ludwig Wittgenstein - Opening remark.