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University of Illinois Press

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Source: *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Apr., 2004), pp. 131-150

Published by: [University of Illinois Press](#) on behalf of [North American Philosophical Publications](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27744982>

Accessed: 08-10-2015 03:52 UTC

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FOCAL COMPLEXITY IN ARISTOTLE AND WITTGENSTEIN

Michael W. Pelczar

There are many senses in which a thing may be said to “be,” but all that “is” is related to one central point, one definite kind of thing, and is not said to “be” by a mere ambiguity. Everything which is healthy is related to health, one thing in the sense that it preserves health, another in the sense that it is a symptom of health, another because it is capable of it. And that which is medical is relative to the medical art, one thing being called medical because it possesses it, another because it is naturally adapted to it, another because it is a function of the medical art. And we shall find other words used similarly to these.—Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1003a22–b3

And in the same way we also use the word “to read” for a family of cases. And in different circumstances we apply different criteria for a person’s reading.—Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #164

1. INTRODUCTION

The thesis of this essay is that Wittgenstein’s mature philosophy is deeply Aristotelian in method. Bringing this to light serves two purposes. First, it shows how Wittgenstein’s ideas connect to a body of thought with known relations to a wide range of traditional philosophical issues, making it easier to see how his ideas bear on such issues. Second (and partly as a result of this), it casts serious doubt on the accumulation of Wittgenstein scholarship that depicts his philosophy as involving a radical break with the past, or as something that could have emerged only within a “post-modern” intellectual milieu. On the interpretation defended here, Wittgenstein is very much a philosopher’s philosopher, whose thought is of a piece with the classical tradition.

We begin with a group of Aristotelian ideas centering on what Owen calls “focal meaning,” arguing for a somewhat different understanding of these from what scholars currently accept.¹ We then argue for a certain understanding of Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance and point out various ways in which this reproduces the aforementioned elements of Aristotle’s thought. Finally, we consider the ways in which Wittgenstein departs from Aristotelians, concluding that his basic position does not substantially improve on theirs, as far as it depends on family resemblance.

2. FOCAL COMPLEXITY

At the center of Aristotle’s mature philosophy lies the notion of “a thing said in many ways in relation to a single character.”² The basic idea is that of a predicable F for which there is no such thing as *the* class of Fs. As Aristotle develops it, the notion of a thing said in many ways in relation to a single character is not in the first instance semantic, although it does have semantic implications. If F-hood is said in many ways in relation to a single character, then the predicate “is F” has a variety of extensions, since in that case there is no unique totality of entities that it embraces in each application. Such predicates and predicables have what we shall call *focal complexity*.

Aristotle gives the example of health. To say that a person is healthy is to say that his humors are well-balanced (or some such), whereas to call a complexion healthy is to predicate of it the quality of being indicative of well-balanced humors. What this means at the semantic level is that when applied to a person, the predicate “healthy” stands for the property of having well-balanced humors, while in application to a complexion, the same predicate represents the distinct property of indicating the presence of well-balanced humors. Similarly, in application to a diet, “healthy” represents the property of promoting well-balanced humors; and so forth for various other applications. In modern terms, Aristotle’s view is that the predicate “healthy” has different extensions in relevantly different applications.

A predicate with focal complexity works something like the word “here,” which also has its content fixed by contextual factors. The main difference, perhaps, is that while “here” depends for its content in a given context on factors mainly independent of what is under discussion in that context, the word “healthy” depends for its content on the kind of thing to which it is applied,

in a given context. As we might put it: whereas “here” has its content fixed by *situational* contextual factors, what fixes the content of “healthy” are *topical* contextual factors, factors pertaining to what we use the focally complex predicate to do in a given discursive context.

There are some deep tensions within Aristotle’s account which we shall discuss when we get to the “focal” part of focal complexity. But first let us see why Aristotle thinks focal complexity is philosophically important. For him, its importance is primarily diagnostic. If there are philosophically important predicates with focal complexity, we are apt to commit fallacies of equivocation in philosophical reasoning, owing to the fact that such predicates can vary in extension from one application to another. For example, if goodness (or the predicate “good”) is focally complex, then the question, “What is goodness?” is bound to cause confusion. The point is not just that goodness is tough to analyze. It is that we are not even in a position to approach the question of what goodness is, or to assess any answer to it, independently of a determination of what goodness amounts to (or what “goodness” stands for) in the given context. If goodness has focal complexity, then asking “What is goodness?” is like asking “What is a bank?” Of course context generally makes it clear which extension the term “bank” has in a given application, but if there were a context in which this were somehow unclear, it would be a serious mistake to try to answer the question without first determining which extension was in question.

Aristotle clearly does think that many of the terms we use in philosophy are focally complex. What this means is that he is a contextualist about a lot of philosophical issues. That is, he thinks that philosophical questions and claims depend for their logical substance partly on facts about the contexts in which they are posed or put forward. If he is right about this, we probably need to reevaluate a lot of philosophical work. What appeared to be counterexamples to analyses of, say, causation, may really have been discoveries of contexts in which causal language expresses a relation different from that proposed by the analysis in question. What we now think of as so many vying accounts of causation (or knowledge, or intentionality, or what have you) may turn out to be so many pieces of a single, focally complex puzzle.

Aristotle scholars tend to overlook or misconstrue his contextualism. According to Shields, for example, “Aristotle seeks to convict his predecessors of an undue reliance on a univocity

assumption, the assumption that an analysis of a given philosophical notion will uncover a unified account, expressible in terms of a non-disjunctive definition," while a Platonist insists "that core philosophical terms admit of unified, non-disjunctive definitions."³ Shields evidently thinks that a focally complex term or concept could admit of disjunctive definition. But Aristotle never qualifies his view this way, never allows the possibility of a "disjunctive" definition, and this strongly suggests that his view does not require any such qualification. For if he really did allow that a disjunctive definition of a focally complex term were possible, he would certainly owe us an account of disjunctiveness. Is a definition disjunctive merely by virtue of its form? But any definition disjunctive in this sense can be rendered non-disjunctive by a simple application of DeMorgan's Laws. What then makes a definition disjunctive, in Shields's sense?

The fact is that Aristotle is committed to the impossibility even of a disjunctive definition of a focally complex predicable: such a definition would, after all, specify a unique extension (e.g., the totality comprising organisms with well-balanced humors, complexions indicative of well-balanced humors, diets promotional of well-balance humors, etc.), which is precisely what a focally complex predicable lacks. What this shows is that the issue of disjunctive definition is, at bottom, a red herring, unless by a disjunctive definition we mean a *listwise* definition, i.e., a definition that consists of a list of all the things to which the defined predicate applies, as in: "Something is a halogen if and only if it is fluorine, or chlorine, or bromine, or iodine, or astatine." But in this sense, Aristotle is indeed committed to the impossibility of a disjunctive definition, inasmuch as no *single* list of individuals can capture the various extensions that a focally complex predicate has the capacity to represent.

This brings us at last to the "focal" part of focal complexity. In order for his claim that various philosophical predicates are deceptively univocal to hold much water, Aristotle must explain what differentiates such predicates from other parts of speech that equally vary in content, such as homonyms like "bat" and indexicals like "mine." The latter vary in content quite obviously, so that no intelligent person can mix up the various senses of "bat" or mistake "mine" for the name of an umbrella. In order for extension variability to make philosophical fallacies at all likely, the variability of philosophical predicates would have to be very subtle and hard to detect. Even the example of health is too obvi-

ous to lead any intelligent person seriously astray. A term like "good" or "causes" has focal complexity only if it has it in an exceedingly subtle form. The idea that it stands for different qualities or relations in different contexts is therefore bound to strike many as implausible. The situation is complicated by the fact that a moralist or metaphysician is apt to think that he already has at least an initial draft of an analysis of goodness or causation which (if completed) would enable him to specify the conditions necessary and sufficient for being good (or causing).

But here we are apt to go astray. The possibility of formulating a true statement to the effect that a thing is good if and only if it is such-and-such shows that there is a uniform and unvarying condition necessary and sufficient for the (true) application of the predicate "good." However, we must distinguish between the conditions by virtue of satisfying which a thing may be truly said to be good, and the qualities that such a thing is said to have, in being said (truly) to be good. Unfortunately, this is a distinction that it is all too easy to overlook, with the result that it is all too easy to move from the truth that there is an unvarying condition of true application of "good" to the falsehood that there is a quality that this term expresses in every application. Aristotle warns against this explicitly:

Often in the actual accounts [of philosophical concepts] as well homonymy creeps in without being noticed, and for this reason the accounts also should be examined. If (e.g.) any one describes what betokens and produces health as being in a balanced state, we must not desist but go on to examine in what sense he has used the term "balanced" in each case, e.g., if in the latter case it means that it is of the right amount to produce health, whereas in the former it means that it is such as to betoken what kind of state prevails.⁴

Again: the fact that we can specify conditions necessary and sufficient for something's being good does not imply the existence of a property such that for a thing to be good is simply for it to have that property. For the specified conditions may themselves have focal complexity, designating different properties in relevantly different contexts. In that case, the focal complexity of goodness silently "creeps into the account," which may foster the illusion that "good" has the same extension in every use.⁵

However, to make sense of the possibility that we often mistake focally complex representations for representations of fixed extension, it is not enough to note the possibility of homonymy

that creeps into the account. Any such homonymy would itself have to be covert and easily mistaken for a case of extension invariance, in order for us not to notice its presence in the account. In general, we cannot explain how we might mistake a focally complex term for a term of fixed extension by appealing to the possibility of mistaking other focally complex terms into which it may be analyzed for terms of fixed extension. For all Aristotle has shown so far, it may be that the reason why the terms into which we analyze “good” seem not to vary in extension is that they do not so vary.

Aristotle is aware of this problem. To explain how we might mistake an extension variable term or concept for one of fixed extension, he and his successors develop an account of how the various extensions of a term like “good” relate to one another so as to constitute a unity of sorts—a unity not exhibited by the extensions of an openly ambiguous term. The basic idea is that one of the various properties that a term like “good” can express is preeminent, in that the other properties that the term expresses can be variously defined with reference to this preeminent or *focal* property. For example, we can define “healthy” as it applies to complexions in terms of “healthy” as it applies to organisms: a complexion is healthy just in case it is indicative of a healthy organism (i.e., an organism with well-balanced humors). Similarly, we can define other applications of “healthy” (e.g., to diets) in terms of “healthy” taken with its focal sense. Thus interrelated, the extensions of a focally complex predicable exhibit greater unity than those of an ambiguous word like “bat” (or an indexical like “mine”) whose various extensions are definitionally unrelated.

Focality is not a logical or semantic notion, but an epistemic or metaphysical one. There is no logical or semantic barrier to defining “healthy” as it applies to people in terms of “healthy” as it applies to complexions (a healthy person is one with a constitution of the sort typically indicated by a healthy complexion). What gives focal status to one sense of a focally complex term is that sense’s place in the explanatory order of things. The idea is that a healthy constitution is somehow explanatorily prior to a healthy complexion—certainly it seems to be prior in the order of causes—and likewise for all the other qualities that “healthy” has the capacity to denote.

This casts doubt on the view that Aristotle was very much interested in using focal complexity in a constructive way, to

discover focal interconnections among the various extensions of a focally complex concept.⁶ For, on the Aristotelian view, the structure that these extensions exhibit derives from facts of causal and explanatory connection, not from definitional relations of the sort that we can discover through conceptual or semantic analysis. We identify focal complexity by identifying the explanatory connections among a concept's extensions, not the other way around.

The scholastics develop the notion of focality in considerable detail, cashing out the notion of explanatory priority in fairly precise terms.⁷ The problem, however, is this: if we say that the qualities or extensions corresponding to a focally complex predicable relate to one another focally, then such a predicable appears to have just one extension after all. For example, healthiness will have for its extension the totality H that includes organisms with well-balanced humors and whatever is focally related to members of H. Such a recursive definition will always be available, as long as the focal relation is transitive, irreflexive, and antisymmetric, as it apparently must be if it is to bind a focal term's peripheral senses to its focal sense in the desired way. But a recursive definition is sufficient to specify a unique extension. Yet a focally complex predicable is not supposed to have just one extension, but various extensions in various contexts.

Thus it appears that the Aristotelians cannot have both multiple extensionality and focality. The two are simply incompatible, making the notion of focal complexity internally inconsistent.⁸ This is a major problem with the Aristotelian account, and it goes unresolved in the Scholastic tradition. In the next section, we consider whether it finds a solution in Wittgenstein.

3. FAMILY RESEMBLANCE

In #65 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces the notion of family resemblance as the fundamental idea behind his new philosophical system, and the key point of fracture from his old ways of thinking:

65. Here we come up against the great question that lies behind all these considerations.—For someone might object against me: “You take the easy way out! You talk about all sorts of language-games, but have nowhere said what the essence of a language-game, and hence of language, is: what is common to all these activities, and what makes them into language or parts of language. So you let yourself off the very

part of the investigation that once gave you yourself most headache, the part about the *general form of propositions* and of language.”

And this is true.—Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,—but that they are *related* to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all “language.” I will try to explain this.⁹

The explanation comes in the following well known series of passages:

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, or 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. . . .

And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes similarities in the large, sometimes similarities in the small.

67. 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, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: “games” form a family.

And for instance the kinds of number form a family in the same way. Why do we call something a “number”? Well, perhaps because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fiber on fiber. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fiber runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers. . . .

These passages are deceptively easy to construe: a word like “game” or “number” corresponds to a concept that applies to some

things by virtue of their having certain qualities, and applies to others by virtue of their having certain other qualities, so that there is no *single* quality by virtue of which the concept applies in every case. Yet, as Wittgenstein objects against himself in #68, it looks as if there will always at least be the possibility of a disjunctive definition, in which case there always will be a single such quality. But Wittgenstein denies that this need be so:

68. "All right: the concept of number is defined for you as the logical sum [inclusive disjunction] of these individual interrelated concepts: cardinal numbers, rational numbers, etc.; and in the same way the concept of a game as the logical sum of a corresponding set of sub-concepts."—It need not be so. For I *can* give the concept 'number' rigid limits in this way, that is, use the word "number" for a rigidly limited concept, but I can also use it so that the extension of the concept is *not* closed by a frontier. And this is how we do use the word "game."

By now, we know what this means: as our study of focal complexity revealed, the only way in which a concept can resist even "disjunctive definition" is by varying in extension. In order to make sense of Wittgenstein's comments in #68 and related passages, therefore, we must understand family resemblance as a species of extension variability. This should not come as much of a surprise, since Wittgenstein calls on the phenomenon of extension variability explicitly at various points throughout the *Investigations*:

You say to me: "You understand this expression, don't you? Well then—I am using it in the sense you are familiar with."—As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application. (#117)

You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word. Here the word, there the meaning. The money, and the cow that you can buy with it. (But contrast: money, and its use.) (#120)

In saying "When I heard this word, it meant . . . to me" one refers to a *point of time* and to a *way of using the word*. (Of course, it is this combination that we fail to grasp.) (*Philosophical Investigations* II.ii)

Like Aristotle, Wittgenstein's interest in extension variability is primarily motivated by the possibility that we sometimes mistake concepts that vary in extension for ones that do not. As Wittgenstein sees it, this basic mistake stands to have serious consequences

for philosophical inquiry, consequences that fall into three main categories: hidden truth value gaps, misdirected inquiry, and deceptively rational disagreement.

Hidden Truth Value Gaps

Suppose that someone says “It’s humid today” as the clock is striking midnight. In this context, it may be impossible for the speaker’s audience to figure out what he said, without asking him what he meant by “today.” But what if the speaker himself has lost track of the time, so that not even his own intentions fix a reference for “today”? In that case, the context may fail to fix any reference for the word at all.

In general, there is nothing to guarantee that every context in which we use an indexical has the features required to determine an extension for that indexical. Thus, given the indexical character of any concept amenable to contextual analysis, it is possible that there are contexts in which such a concept fails to have any extension whatever. For example, if the concept of knowledge is a covertly variable concept, there may be contexts that do not determine any extension for it. In such contexts, it would be impossible to say anything true or false using the verb “to know.” Moreover, given that we are unaware of the fact that a covertly variable concept depends on context for its extension, we are unlikely to recognize that certain contexts fail to fix an extension for it. For an *invariant* concept has an extension in every context, if it has one in any.

There is one way that a variable concept could fail of extension that is particularly germane to philosophy, connected with what we may call the “Augustine effect”:

Augustine says in the Confessions “quid est ergo tempus? se nemo ex me quaerat scio; se quaerenti explicare velim, nescio”.—This could not be said about a question of natural science (“What is the specific gravity of hydrogen?” for instance). (#89)¹⁰

The Augustine effect comes about when we ask, “What is x?” or, “What is it, for something to be F?” and find it impossible to come up with an adequate answer, despite being perfectly capable of identifying x under quotidian circumstances, or of recognizing various ordinary claims made in terms of F-hood as true or false. This situation is of course extremely common in philosophy. Although we are all competent to use the concepts of knowledge, beauty, and fairness, we are generally hard-pressed to say what

it is for someone to know something, or to be beautiful, or treat others fairly.

If such concepts as these are covertly variable, this would explain the Augustine effect. For, as we saw earlier, a covertly variable concept relies primarily on topical contextual factors for its extension, where the topic of a context is principally a function of the concepts used in it. Obviously, if a concept varies in extension, the fact that it is itself used in a given context is not sufficient to determine an extension for it, in that context (otherwise it would always have this extension, and so not vary in extension after all). But contexts in which we pose questions like “What is knowledge?” or, “What is it, for an act or institution to be fair?” are precisely ones in which the topic is simply the concept in question. In such contexts, we use a concept (such as that of knowledge or fairness) simply to inquire into its own nature. Thus, if such concepts are topical indexicals, it is quite likely that they fail of extension, in contexts of this sort. In Wittgenstein’s picturesque metaphor, these are contexts in which “language goes on holiday” (#38).¹¹

Misdirected Inquiry

This explanation of the Augustine effect suggests that we are prone to get off on the wrong foot in our philosophical inquiries. It is as if we were to ask, “What is it, to get something?” in complete ignorance of the fact that “get” represents different relations (with different extensions) in different contexts. Of course, the transparency of terms like “get” makes it impossible for an intelligent person to mistake them for representations of fixed extension, but this same transparency makes such indexicals useful in predicting the likely impact of unnoticed extension variability.

So, suppose that someone really does mistake the verb “to get” for a term of fixed extension, and suffering from this misconception sets out to discover what it is, to get something. How will he proceed? An initially plausible account might have it that to get something is to take ownership of it. But we would quickly subject this to counterexample—one can get an idea without coming into ownership of anything. From here, the story continues naturally: the hypothetical ignoramus offers a definition of “gets,” we produce a case that indicates the inadequacy of his definition, he refines his definition, we produce another problem case, and so on.

From our (relatively enlightened) standpoint, this would all be a rather pointless joke. But from our victim’s perspective,

things look different. For, in his ignorance, he takes “gets” to stand always for the same relation, so that our counterinstances appear to him to show that the term never stands for any of the relations he proposes. Hence, while *we* see that with each proposal he hits upon yet another relation for which the word has the capacity to stand, *he* sees only a dispiriting string of failures. Unlike us, he does not realize that what is really going on is that we are influencing the context so that the extension of “gets” shifts. He proposes an analysis in terms of ownership, we bring up ideas; he proposes a broader analysis in terms of possession, we bring up measles; etc.

All this is just fiction, of course. But if the concepts we use in philosophy covertly vary in extension, the joke is quite factually on *us*. (#111) For in that case, counterexamples to a philosophical analysis of a concept are apt to consist of outlying applications of the concept—that is, applications of it in contexts wherein extensional covariance between *analysans* and *analysandum* breaks down.

Supposing this were so, what would be the right way to undertake a philosophical inquiry? To begin with, we would need to get clear on when (in which contexts) a given philosophical concept had one extension versus another. We would also have to be careful about how we identified the concept’s various extensions. To revert to the case of getting: it may be that such concepts as ownership, possession, and contraction themselves vary in extension. If so, we would have to get clear on how they did so, once again taking care in how we identified their various extensions. How far we would have to pursue this line of investigation would depend on the concept we were investigating. Nor would there be any guarantee that the contextual analysis would bottom out in the form of a distribution of recognizable fixed extension concepts. For all we can tell in advance, the concept might turn out to correspond to a distribution of extensions some or all of which failed to correspond to any of the fixed extension concepts that we actually use.

Alternatively, it might turn out that there was one extension that the concept we were investigating had in nearly every context. However, we would have to be cautious in arriving at this conclusion. For example, it may turn out that the concept of knowing is a variable concept whose extension mainly coincides with that of the concept of correctly and justifiably believing. But from this it would not follow that there was a certain extension that the concept of knowledge had in most contexts. For, as we have

seen, it could be that the concept of correctly and justifiably believing *itself* varies in extension. We would have to rule out this possibility before concluding that the concept of knowledge maintained a single extension throughout most of its applications.¹²

Deceptively Rational Disagreement

A third potential implication of covert extension variability arises from the specific *way* in which the extensions of some family resemblance concepts may (covertly) depend on context. In particular, it may be that certain philosophical concepts resemble various everyday indexicals in terms of the control that those who make use of them have over their extensions.

There are two ways in which one might have control over what falls under a concept. One is by creating or destroying things that fall within that concept's extension (in a given context). For example, a man may have a certain amount of control over what falls under the concept of a gin and tonic: if he mixes himself a gin and tonic, he adds to the world something that falls under this concept. To the extent that it is up to him whether a gin and tonic comes into existence on this occasion, he has some control over the extension of the concept of a gin and tonic.

The other way in which one might have an element of control over a concept's extension is by having a say in what conditions a thing must satisfy in order to fall within that concept's extension, with respect to a given context of application. A man might have *this* kind of control over a concept's extension without having the other kind of control at all. This is because he might have the power to give a concept an extension the conditions for membership in which are ones that he cannot cause anything to satisfy (or prevent anything from satisfying).

It is this second kind of control that speakers have over the extensions of certain extension variable words, in certain contexts. Take the word "that." What this term refers to in a given context may well depend on what its user intends to refer to by it, in that context. For example, someone might point to a group of people and say: "That's Sam!" If his audience cannot tell from his gesture or other public contextual evidence which person the speaker means, they must consult him to determine the content of his use of "that." In this case, it is the speaker's intentions that are the final arbiter of extension. In other words, the speaker has an element of *discretion* over the extension of "that," in this case.

The case of “that” is just a particularly obvious example. Most ordinary indexicals depend at times on the intentions or desires of those who use them. Consider the word “here.” In every use, it stands for the location of that use. But what is “the location” of the context in which a given speech act occurs? Typically, there is no such thing: a person might use the word “here” in the Oval Office, in which case he also uses it in the White House, in Washington, D.C., in the United States, on the planet Earth, etc. Clearly, the rule that “here” always stands for the location of its use is inadequate, or at least idealized. Some tightening up is possible by reference to contextual factors arising from topic of conversation and conversational norms. However, even taking all other contextual factors into account, there will be some contexts in which an element of speaker intention is required to fix a specific extension for the word “here.” True, we have only occasional and limited power over what “here” signifies in the contexts in which we use it; but all the same, we do sometimes have such power, and this is enough to show that speakers maintain the right, under certain circumstances, to have a say in what the word designates.

In Wittgenstein’s view, we maintain a similar right when it comes to certain philosophical concepts. To be sure, there are limits on what a given concept can comprehend, in a given context in which we use it; for example, the concept of knowledge does not in any context apply where belief is lacking. But these limits may not always be complete, since there may be circumstances under which a thinker might use a concept, in which the concept’s extension depended crucially on his aims, intentions, or preferences:

83. Doesn’t the analogy between language and games throw light here? We can easily imagine people amusing themselves in a field by playing with a ball so as to start various existing games, but playing many without finishing them and in between throwing the ball aimlessly into the air, chasing one another with the ball and bombarding one another for a joke and so on. And now someone says: The whole time they are playing a ball-game and following definite rules at every throw. And is there not also the case where we play and—make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along.

And this is how we do use the word “game.” For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can

draw one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word “game.”) (#68)

Just as we have a certain amount of discretion over the extension of a term like “that,” “here,” or “game,” so, according to Wittgenstein, we may have a certain amount of discretion over the extension of a concept like that of knowledge, or beauty, or evil:

For imagine having to sketch a sharply defined picture “corresponding” to a blurred one. In the latter there is a blurred red rectangle: for it you put down a sharply defined one. Of course—several such sharply defined rectangles can be drawn to correspond to the indefinite one—But if the colors in the original merge without a hint of any outline won’t it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one? Won’t you then have to say: “Here I might just as well draw a circle or heart as a rectangle, for all the colors merge. Anything—and nothing—is right.”—And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics. (#77)

The possibility that we have an element of discretion over the extension of certain philosophically important concepts suggests that certain philosophical debates may by their very nature resist purely rational resolution. To see why, we may first of all consider a disagreement between two people as to whether a given *fixed* extension concept applies to a given thing. In such a case, it is possible, at least in principle, for these people to settle their disagreement by determining whether that thing falls within that concept’s extension. Similarly, if they disagree over whether a given thing falls under a concept of *variable* extension, they may well be able to settle their disagreement, by first ascertaining what extension the concept has in the context in which the disagreement arises, and then (as in the previous case) figuring out whether the thing in dispute belongs to this (contextually determined) extension.

But what if the variable concept in question depends for its extension in this context partly on the intentions, desires, or preferences of those who use it? What if each of the disputants exercises some discretion over what the concept’s extension is, in this context? In that case, it may be impossible for them to settle their dispute in a purely rational manner, inasmuch as reason and evidence alone may fail to persuade either party to exercise his discretion in the same way as the other. If so, the disagreement is more in the nature of a negotiation than a scientific dispute.

Actually, there is a sense in which even such a disagreement might admit of rational resolution. Tom may be able to produce evidence that it is in Jerry's best interest to exercise his discretion in the same way Tom does. As long as this is not evidence that Tom will harm Jerry unless he exercises his discretion as Tom desires, producing it may be said to resolve their disagreement in a rational manner. But even if he is fully rational, Jerry might well fail to be persuaded by such evidence. If so, his disagreement with Tom will simply fail to admit of rational resolution.

Might certain philosophical disagreements be like this? Yes, if the concepts central to certain philosophical debates are family resemblance concepts. For example, if the concept of a morally right action varies in extension in ways that are partly at the discretion of those who use it, it may be impossible for those who disagree as to the moral status of a given action to settle their disagreement in a strictly rational way.

So much for the potential ramifications of family resemblance. What reason does Wittgenstein give us to think that any concept of philosophical importance covertly varies in extension? Indeed, what reason does he give us to believe that the kind of covert extension variability involved in family resemblance is so much as possible?

Recall that it was the need to explain the possibility of hidden extension variability that motivated Aristotle to introduce his notion of focality. Aristotle recognized the need to explain how we could possibly mistake a representation of variable extension for one of fixed extension, given that we do not make this kind of mistake when it comes to openly homonymous or indexical representations. Unfortunately for Aristotle, we have found that the focality relation itself provides the basis for a single extension, for which reason the Aristotelian account fails.

Wittgenstein faces the same challenge as Aristotle, in that he too must account for the difference between a philosophical family resemblance term and a mere homonym or indexical, whose extension variability is open to plain view. Disappointingly, it looks like Wittgenstein essentially reiterates the Aristotelian account, replacing focality (with its presupposition of an underlying order of explanatory priority among the different uses of a term) with a looser relation of "overlapping and criss-crossing." (#66) The suggestion seems to be that what allows us to mistake a family resemblance term for a term that has the same extension in every

application is the fact that the various extensions of such a term differ from one another only in small, subtle ways, making it easy to think that the distinct but closely resembling extensions that the term variously possesses are in fact a single extension.

If this is indeed Wittgenstein's view, then it fails to explain covert extension variability for much the same reason that the Aristotelian account in terms of focality failed to do so. If the various extensions of the word "game" relate to one another in this overlapping way, then the word has a single extension in all applications after all: the extension comprising a given game together with whatever sufficiently resembles (or "overlaps") any element of this extension.

The only way that the appeal to similarities among a predicate's various extensions can fail to yield the contradictory implication that the predicate has just one, recursively specifiable extension is if the concept of similarity itself is a family resemblance concept. Now, there is evidence that Wittgenstein does regard similarity (or resemblance) as a family resemblance concept (see #72–#73, #208–#215). But this only pushes the question back to how we could mistake the concept of *similarity* for a concept of fixed extension. Here, further appeal to similarities among this concept's (putatively) various extensions clearly will not do. What we need is an independent account of how the illusion of extensional fixity could arise in the case of similarity or any other concept.

Unfortunately, Wittgenstein fails to provide such an account. He obviously thinks that we do suffer from this kind of illusion: he speaks of philosophy as a "battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (#109) and of philosophical problems as "grammatical illusions" (#110) whose "roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language." (#111) But nowhere does he explain how such illusions could arise, much less demonstrate that we are actually subject to such an illusion in the case of a specific philosophical concept. At best, he seems content to rely on an inference to the best explanation: the hypothesis that various concepts have a tendency to shift in extension unbeknownst to us stands to clear up a lot of philosophical problems; therefore, for the sake of clearing up these problems, we should accept that these concepts do vary in extension in this way. But absent some account of just how we could make the sort of mistakes that Wittgenstein's resolution of the problems requires, we are apt to doubt whether we really do make such mistakes.

4. CONCLUSION

If the interpretations of Aristotle and Wittgenstein developed in this essay are correct, these two philosophers are far more similar in method and outlook than previously recognized. Both turn out to be linguistic philosophers, and contextualist error theorists at that. Both develop the notion of a concept corresponding to a plurality of extensions, and both struggle to distinguish the predicates that express such concepts from terms that vary in extension in obvious, overt ways. Only at this already ramified stage of development do their positions begin to diverge, with Aristotle favoring what appears to be a doomed strategy involving focal relations, and Wittgenstein advocating a slightly different strategy that suffers from the same flaw as Aristotle's.

We revisit the same issues again and again in philosophy, so there is bound to occur a certain amount of rediscovery in our field. Still, it is striking just how similarly Aristotle and Wittgenstein approach philosophy, and how far their quite characteristic positions overlap. The similarity is all the more suggestive since Wittgenstein did not work in an intellectual environment likely to impart him much Scholastic thought through casual contact. This is not to deny the possibility that Wittgenstein was unconsciously drawing on sources lodged deep within the philosophical tradition. But even this would be surprising, absent a more direct connection. Here we seem to have a genuine case of convergent intellectual evolution.

Be that as it may, one thing has become clear over the course of this essay: the overall position on which Aristotle and Wittgenstein converge stands badly in need of an account of how an intelligent person could mistake a predicate or concept of variable extension for one of fixed extension. Whether such an account is possible remains to be seen.

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NOTES

1. See G. E. L. Owen, "Logic and Metaphysics in some Earlier Works of Aristotle," *Logic, Science, and Dialectic: Collected Papers in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 180–199. Where Owen speaks of focal meaning, Shields speaks of "core-dependent homonymy" (see Christopher Shields, *Order in Multiplicity: Homonymy in the Philosophy of Aristotle* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999]), and we shall speak in this essay of "focal complexity."

2. See *Metaphysics* 1003a32–b3. Except where indicated otherwise, all Aristotle references are to *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), vols. 1 and 2.

3. See Shields, *Order in Multiplicity*, pp. 44 and 50, respectively. Shields maintains that "Aristotle should not be content with disjunctive definitions" on the grounds that "disjunctive definitions are as such suspect, because they do not specify whether any other disjuncts may be forthcoming; they do not, that is, carry closure clauses" (*ibid.*, p. 181). The obvious remedy for this defect (such as it is) would be to add a closure clause, or, in cases where this is not feasible, to provide a recursive definition (see below, p. 9).

4. *Topics* 107b6–12, translated in Shields, *Order in Multiplicity*, pp. 18–19.

5. In view of these considerations, Shields is mistaken in claiming that with his account of focal complexity "Aristotle can fairly claim to have uncovered some logical space for analysis, a *tertium quid* between univocity, or definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and mere family resemblance" (Shields, *Order in Multiplicity*, p. 269). As Aristotle himself acknowledges in this passage, focal complexity does not preclude a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

6. See, e.g., Shields, *Order in Multiplicity*, pp. 73, 269.

7. See especially Tommaso de Vio (Cardinal Cajetan), *The Analogy of Names, and the Concept of Being*, trans. Edward A. Bushinski, in collaboration with Henry J. Koren (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1953).

8. Of course, it may be possible to make something of the idea that the notion of explanatory priority central to focality is itself a concept of multiple extensions. But the question would now arise what gave *this* concept its internal unity.

9. All subsequent numerical references are to Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958).

10. The Latin translates: "What then is time? If no one asks me, I know; but if someone asks me, I don't know."

11. In this respect, a covertly variable concept would differ from a fixed concept, which does not depend on contextual factors for its extension. It would also differ from an indexical like "this" or "here," which does not rely primarily on *topic* for its extension. "Where is this place?" does not produce the Augustine effect.

12. This appears to be the point of Wittgenstein's discussion of reading, #156– #178. In this discussion, Wittgenstein attempts to illustrate the phenomenon of "homonymy that creeps into the account" discussed by Aristotle (see above, p. 135).