CHAPTER - IV

LANGUAGE AND ESSENCE
One problem of language connected with meaning has been the problem of meaning of general terms. This problem, in its more general aspect is also the problem of classification. The latter problem may be put in the form of the question "what is the explanation of the fact that we are capable of classifying particulars?" Our ability to classify particulars is such a fundamental and pervasive fact about the human condition that it would be easy not to see it as a fact at all. To do justice to the insight which prompts the above question we have to make ourselves see as peculiar - almost as mysterious - this ability of ours.

But let us try and do this exercise on the problem in its linguistic form. Consider the words "John" and "fat" as they are ordinarily used in the English language. Each may be applied to a particular either correctly or incorrectly, but the issues about correctness or incorrectness are thoroughly different in the two cases. Suppose there is a person in front of me and I want to know whether I can correctly apply the word "John" to him i.e., call him John. I may know of dozens of other people whom I know to be called John and hundreds whom I know are not
called John, but that knowledge does not help me at all with my present problem. In order to know whether I can correctly call the stranger John I must know what he is customarily called so by his acquaintances, was first called by his parents etc.

On the other hand because I know many people to whom the word "fat" applies and more to whom it does not, the odds are that I can determine whether or not this word can be correctly applied to the stranger without knowing whether anyone has ever applied it too, or denied it of, him. In some way my knowledge about other particulars to which I know that the word "fat" applies, and about still others to which I know that it does not apply, equips me to apply it confidently and correctly to the stranger.

What the question about classification that I mentioned above asks is; "how is the trick worked?," to put it in the linguistic form the question is, "when two or more people have agreed on a sufficient number of instances and counter instances of a general word, they can without any conflict agree on most further instances and counter instances - how is that trick worked?"
Now someone who asks "how is that trick worked?," is asking not for a causal or physiological explanation, but rather for an account of what the technique is, what rule and rules are followed. His question is nothing like the questions, "what is the explanation of the fact that new born babies can breathe?" It is somewhat like the question; "what is the explanation of the fact that a physician can tell from an external examination what the internal trouble is?" So the question about general terms turns into something like; what rule or rules are to be followed when we apply general terms or what is our technique or method for correctly applying general terms?

These questions are in principle unanswerable. There could not be a technique or method for applying general terms as such i.e., a procedure which someone employed in every classification or every time that he applied a general term. And the reason for this is as follows. A technique or set of rules for doing D must be capable of serving as a set of instructions for how to do D - instructions which could in principle guide someone who did not know how to do D. But no technique for classification could be used as a guide by someone who could not classify at all. The technique or rules of
instruction would have to be of the form; "if such and such is the case, and a given particular \( x \) is \( k \) then classify \( x \) in such and such a way." But knowing whether a given particular \( x \) is \( k \) is knowing how to classify it in some respect. Wittgenstein saw this, and so did Kant. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that there cannot be rules for how to apply concepts to particulars; for if someone needs a rule in order to be able to apply concepts to particulars then he needs a further rules in order to be able to apply the first rule and so on ad infinitum.

Of Wittgenstein's many ways of making the same point, one involves the number series model. Someone might know the appropriate general formula for a given number series and yet be unable to continue the series in accordance with the formula. One is tempted to say, "that shows that he does not understand the formula; so we must explain it to him." But Wittgenstein says if we try to do this by giving him a general account of what the formula means then we are just giving him a second formula for the application of the first. This might do the trick; it might enable our men to continue the series in the manner dictated by the formula. On the other hand it
might not; and it certainly would not if his problem was that he did not understand general formula (See in the Remarks on the foundation of Mathematics, Part I Section 1-4 and Philosophical Investigations, Section 189-190 and for a slightly different formulation of the same basic point Section 85-86). The foregoing arguments enable us to predict that any purported technique of using general words as such will be circular, question begging, competence - presupposing. That is it will offer a rule for classification which could only be followed by someone who already knew how to classify.

Let us try to test these predictions against a famous attack to describe a technique as such for classification; or for use of general terms as such. We may give this attempt the general name of platonism. In giving this label one does not necessarily imply much about the historical Plato. For a more recent version of platonism see Russell’s Problems of Philosophy, Chapter 9-10. Platonism says that as well as particular items there are universal items - which may provisionally be called properties, universals or essences. A universal does not have a spatio temporal location but it, the whole of it may be instantiated by any number of particulars at various times.
end in various places and it ---, the whole of it, may be apprehended or thought about by various people at various times. According to platonism any classification is associated with some universal. If I am capable of assigning particulars to kind K, then I must in some way apprehend a universal U which is uniquely associated with K; when the question arises of whether a particular, x, is to be assigned to K, what I do is to observe whether x instantiates U and, if it does, assign it to K. If x does not instantiate U then I do not assign it to K. What enables me to assign x to K? Platonism's answer to this question is; my knowing that x and y instantiated a single universal. Then what enables you and me to assign x to K? Platonism's answer is; our both associating a single universal K and our both observing x instantiates U. In general the question is "many particulars, but one kind or classification or general term - how come?" And platonism's answer is several particulars but one universal - that is how come?

A general criticism of platonism has been that universals are mysterious metaphysical entities, that it is not possible really to make sense of talk about universals. This criticism however, whether valid or not has
littlu relevanue to an assessment of theories of the Plato­
tonic type as such. And in any case talk about universals

can be made sense of in any of the following ways without
reference to any mysterious entities; to say that two par­
ticulars can instantiate a single universal is the same as
to say that (i) they can share a single property (e.g.
can both be green), (ii) they can belong to a single kind
can (iii) properly be co-classified. If something like
this is accepted as bringing out what it means to say that
two particulars can instantiate a single universal and
more generally of bringing out of what is meant by talk
about universals generally - then there are universals,
there is nothing mysterious and peculiar about them and
two particular can indeed instantiate a single one of them.
But then platonism's answer to the question that we posed
above will obviously be useless. It will offer a rule of
classification which someone can follow only if he can
already tell whether two particulars instantiates a single
universal i.e., whether they belong to a single kind or
can properly be co-classified. The platonic "technique"
then is on a par with; "classify something as a case of
malaria if the patient has malaria; otherwise don't." And
the circularity here is too obvious to be pointed out.
Port - II

Another problem connected with the problem of universal is that of the definability or otherwise of words in a particular language. It has for instance been claimed that since any word in a language can only be defined in terms of other words, there must be some words which must be incapable of being defined. Such words are what philosophers have sometimes called simple words, words which cannot be further verbally defined but only ostensively so; words such as 'blue,' 'red' etc. This problem however did not seem to worry Wittgenstein as much as the problem of the "indefinability" of words of another class e.g., "train," "party" and perhaps "games." The difficulty about such terms is not that we cannot get started, but rather that when we do get started we find that whatever we put on the right hand side is either too weak or too strong. This is sometimes expressed by saying "there is nothing common to all games by virtue of which they are games," and in this the phrase "nothing common to" suggests that the point about those words is that they cannot be defined conjunctively. But this however does not seem to be the point. If there is a valid point about "game" it is that its meaning cannot be captured in a tolerably brief
definition of any form. Here is how Wittgenstein makes the point about the meaning of "game." "Don't say: "There must be something in 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! - 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. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances.'" This brings out a difference between words such as blue for instance and words such as games. Blue things differ in all sorts of ways but it is not true that blue things manifest "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" and that it is this network which justifies there being called "blue." Whereas the point about game is not just that there is a network of similarities but further that something counting as a game depends upon its relation to this network.

When Wittgenstein says "you will not see something that is common to all," why should we not reply "we do see something common to all: All games are activities?" This would refute that Wittgenstein says but not what he means. What he means is that there is nothing which must be possessed by every game and cannot be possessed by any non-game i.e., that we cannot say what it is for something to be a game by stating necessary and sufficient conditions for gamehood. It is pity that some of Wittgenstein's formulations mask the fact that this is the point.

Is there a connection between what we might call Wittgenstein's family resemblance doctrine and the problem of universals that we discussed in part I of this section. Some philosophers have thought that there indeed is such a connection. A fairly powerful attempt at establishing such a connection is that of R. Bambrough in his article "universals and family resemblances." Bambrough's treatment of the problem of universal as such is similar to our treatment of the problem in part I of this chapter and also, therefore, to Wittgenstein's treatment of it. However the question of the connection between the problem of universals and Wittgenstein's remarks about family resemblances is a separate one. Although somethings that Wittgenstein says might lend support to the idea that the
doctrine of family resemblances might have something to do with the "solution" of the problem of universals, it is much more closer to the truth to take the family resemblance remarks as confined to a rather narrow area of language than to a solution of a very general problem about the applicability of general terms as such. It is indeed the case that the family resemblance material seems to (and indeed does) raise issues about definability; Bambrough remarks that even a definable word cannot be ultimately explained by definition; and this launches him on the problem of universals. But this is not a very good starting point for a consideration of the problem of universals. A thorough investigation of the problem of universals is not helped by the rather trivial point that I cannot come to understand a word by understanding its definition unless I already understand some other words. Also a family resemblance claim about something say "G" might be rather unconsciously misexpressed by saying that the "Gs" have nothing in common except that they are "Gs"; and a generalized form of this could also be used to make the point about the problem of universals that we made above in part I. It seems that it is this fact more than anything else which has persuaded Bambrough that in seeking
for Wittgenstein's solution (of the problem of universals) we must look mainly to his use of the example of "games." But someone who thinks that these two disparate areas form a unity, because this vague formula can be made to apply to both should consider what he is up against. Here is one small but powerful evidence that the family resemblance material does not bear directly on the problem of universals and was not thought to be so by Wittgenstein. Roughly Wittgenstein's view about universals which Bambrough accepts is based upon an abstract argument for the impossibility of giving a single comprehensive explanation of the fact that things fall into kind or that general words have application at all. Wittgenstein's great achievement was to see that in the platonist account the explicandum is so general and all embracing that some part of it must be in a certain way presupposed, or left out of account by any explanation of anything. If someone offered to argue for Wittgenstein's view in a piecemeal way, by showing that platonism will not work for this classification, or for that, or for that other, we should have to conclude that he had understood neither the problem of universal nor the platonist answer to it, nor Wittgenstein's rejection of that answer. But when Wittgenstein talks about family
resemblances he says: "look and see whether there is anything common to all. To repeat; do not think but look. Look for example at board games, now pass to card games. We pass next to ball games. And the result of this examination is we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing." It is simply impossible to take this as pointing to the correct solution of the problem of universals.

It is interesting that Bambrough should also say the following in the course of his discussion of the family resemblance material. "It is because of the very power of the ways of thought against which Wittgenstein was protesting that Philosophers are led to offer accounts of his doctrine which restricts the range of its application. They recognise the importance of Wittgenstein's demonstration that at least some general terms can justifiably be applied to their instances although those instances have nothing in common. But they are so deeply attached to the idea that there must be something in common to the instances that fall under a general term that they treat Wittgenstein's examples as special cases, as rogues and vagabonds in the realm of concepts, to the general run of law abiding concepts which do mark the presence of common elements in their
instances." There would at least be several philosophers who would not regard Wittgenstein's examples as rogues and vagabonds: one might even ask, does any philosopher? Does Bambrough have any evidence to support this dismissive generalization? The point is important; because someone who says that some words don't have family resemblance kinds of meaning, while agreeing that words which do are plentiful and perfectly respectable, cannot be said to be "deeply attached to the idea that there must be something in common etc." If we must describe him in diagnostic term, what we can say of such a person is that in this respect at least he is innocent of "the ways of thought against which Wittgenstein was protesting": He is free from the "craving for unity," he does not show a contemptuous attitude towards the particular case, he is prepared to "look and see."