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Philosophy and the Philosophical, Literature and the Literary, Borges and the Labyrinthine

In reading the short stories of Jorge Luis Borges one is struck, prompted, and awakened by his exploration of philosophical themes. This lover of labyrinths calls our view of reality into question as he throws us into fictional worlds of illusion and allusion, halls of mirrors, and roads less traveled. He forces us to consider the ontology and epistemology of texts in “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote,” the nature of time and parallel universes in “The Garden of Forking Paths,” the unexpected origin of fate and chance in “The Lottery in Babylon,” and the importance of forgetting and the horrors of memory in Funes, His Memory (to name just a few of his better known short stories).

Beyond simply challenging our unreflective beliefs about the nature of reality, the short stories of Borges call into question the nature of literature and philosophy. Are these ficiones literature? Are they philosophy? If there is one lesson to draw from Borges, it is that we cannot and should not necessarily trust our usual take on things. We must first ask ourselves, What is literature? What is philosophy?

As we shall see, the many attempts at defining literature and philosophy provide much insight but ultimately fail. Why? Not for lack of diligence or ingenuity, but because we cannot define “literature” and “philosophy” in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, that is, give essential definitions of them. Rather, I shall argue that they are terms akin to, though not the same as, Wittgensteinian family resemblance terms. Having argued this, what can we say about the short stories of Borges? Are they literature? Are they philosophy?

Family Resemblance?

As is well known, Wittgenstein articulated the notion of family resemblance in the Blue Book1 and the Philosophical Investigations,2 giving the classic example of games. What makes something a game is difficult or perhaps impossible to specify, but any competent speaker of English knows how to
properly use and apply the term "game." Wittgenstein's ingenious, yet straightforward, explanation is that games share a family resemblance; each of them bears some resemblance to, that is, shares something significant in common with, at least one other, but not all other, games.

In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein tells us, "games form a family, the members of which have family likenesses. Some of them have the same nose, others have the same eyebrows, and others again the same way of walking; and these likenesses overlap." I would argue that we can give a better account of things such as games if we coopt and make use of family resemblance by looking to this passage from the *Blue Book*. What we will offer then is not what Wittgenstein and his followers mean by family resemblance but something significantly different. We will coopt and transform Wittgenstein's antimeophysical notion for our own metaphysical purposes.

When we consider what it means for two people to share an actual family resemblance, we must note that there are right and wrong attributions of it. Two close friends may be mistaken for brothers; a stranger may even say that they look alike and so share a family resemblance. The stranger is right to notice the similarities but wrong to attribute them to a family resemblance. So, noticing similarities and thinking there is a family resemblance are not always sufficient for there actually being one. In the case of actual family resemblance, there must ultimately be an appeal to shared genetics. Shared genetics is a necessary, although not a sufficient, condition for being a person of whom it is correct to say he or she bears the family resemblance.

If actual family resemblance works this way, then perhaps there is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the correct application of family resemblance terms. The condition would, of course, depend on the case at hand. To be clear, Wittgenstein would not agree. Rather, he would maintain that there is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the correct application of family resemblance terms. What we are offering then is inspired by, developed out of, and transforms Wittgenstein's notion; it is not identical to it. To distinguish our conception let us call it "necessary-condition-family-resemblance."

Let us see how this conception of necessary-condition-family-resemblance works in the case of a game. For something to qualify as a game, it must be intended, actually or counterfactually, as a game by at least some of the people playing it at the moment, or, if not being played at the moment, must have been intended, actually or counterfactually, as a game by the players. This clearly applies to all cases of actual games from paradigms, such as basketball, to odd cases, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*. Still, intending something to be a game is not a sufficient condition for it being a game. Arsonists may (in their own demented minds) intend the burning of orphanages to be a game, but that does not make it a game. Burning orphanages does not fit the necessary-condition-family-resemblance. How do we know and correctly object that something does not fit the resemblance? It is in fact absurd in many cases to ask someone to justify the claim that a necessary-condition-family-resemblance term does not apply to a certain entity. As Michael A. Simón aptly says, "We are no more called to account for why we do not call fishing a game than we are for why we do not call reading or washing a game. Reasons can ordinarily be given for declining to apply a predicate to a particular case, to be sure, but they are always of a negative sort and do not differ in principle from why a cat is not called a primate or why a blackboard-eraser is not called an automobile." We can know that a necessary-condition-family-resemblance term applies even when we cannot clearly say why we know it or what our evidence is.

As we observed, a person may look like he shares the family resemblance even if he does not. It is the same with necessary-condition-family-resemblance terms. Something may not be a game although it is game-like. For example, literary allusions with their sense of play are ludic, game-like, but are not games. We should also note that actual family resemblance is open ended and subject to change, with intermarriage and the addition of new members. In the same way then, the proper application of a necessary-condition-family-resemblance term is subject to change and development. What we call a game today may bear only the faint resemblance of a distant ancestor to what we call a game a thousand years from now.

What Is Literature?

In asking the question, what is literature?, we are not speaking of literature in the sense of the secondary meaning of the word, in which it means anything written down—the sense in which we speak about the literature on cloning or Columbus, for example. Rather, we mean literature in the primary, although broad, sense of the word. The range of texts that historically has been classified as literature is indeed broad, and some would like it to be even broader. The poet Shelley wanted to include some legislative statutes as literature, and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., argues that some of the writings of Niels Bohr should be classified as literature, given the way they engage the heart and mind.

How are we to define literature? Hirsch observes that all attempts at a definition of literature end up being stipulative definitions about how the term ought to be used rather than describing how the term actually is used. Of course a stipulative definition may be fine for certain purposes, but it will not do for our purposes for articulating an objective account of what literature is. I shall argue that Hirsch is on the right track; to use our terminology, literature is a necessary-condition-family-resemblance term.

Although we cannot begin to examine every definition of literature proffered by scholars through the ages, we can inspect some of the more important of these definitions and consider how they fit with the notion of family resemblance.
In the article "The Literature of Literature," Robert Sterling argues that "the literature in terms of the aesthetic is to narrate the class, not about it." This perspective reframes literature as an aesthetic endeavor, emphasizing its role in reflecting and criticizing society. Sterling's view resonates with the philosophy and the presupposition of the literature, suggesting a deeper engagement with the nature of human experience and the world around us.
Lamarque and Olsen’s definition places only one very broad requirement on a text being literature, that it be intended and recognized as intended to fit the framework of conventions defining literature. I would suggest that the framework of conventions that “define” literature does not truly define it, but simply enables us to give a rough account of literature. That is, we cannot give a nonstipulative definition of literature in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, like other necessary-condition-family-resemblance terms, literature has a necessary, although not sufficient, condition. Among the intentions (which may be many and varied) of the author in producing literature must be, actually or counterfactually, the intention to produce a text that would fit within the application of the necessary-condition-family-resemblance term “literature.” This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition, for if the text does not fit the resemblance despite the intention, it is not literature. Because the proper application of a necessary-condition-family-resemblance term, in this case “literature,” can never be conclusively settled, there is no hope of combining the caveat that the text must fit the resemblance with the necessary condition that it be intended to fit the resemblance. In combining these two demands we would simply be left with an account that is correct but that does not settle the matter in terms of an essential definition. The chief specification of the definition would rest on something that could not be conclusively settled, that is, how we know if something appears to fit the resemblance.

This is not to suggest that we are in the dark when it comes to knowing what kind of things we look for in judging whether a text fits the necessary-condition-family-resemblance of literature. In judging whether an entity is a game we may consider things such as whether it involves skill or luck, has a winner and loser, provides entertainment and diversion, etc. In a similar way there are characteristics to look for in judging whether a text is an instance of literature. Our preceding discussion and criticism of proposed definitions of literature make a number of those characteristics clear: belonging to a genre such as poetry or the novel normally considered part of literature, having aesthetic intention and merit, being fictional discourse, making extraordinary use of language, being diversionary or nonpragmatic discourse, having cognitive, interpretation-centered, or emotive value, having been accepted by a predecessor concept such as belles lettres, belonging to the work of a great writer, etc. As is the case with “game,” though, neither any single characteristic of literature nor any combination of characteristics yields a nonstipulative definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

“Literature,” as a necessary-condition-family-resemblance term, potentially has a rather broad application; it is not restricted normatively. Still, there are two considerations to keep in mind with regard to the application of the term “literature” that keep it from becoming a vacuously broad notion. First, although the use of the term “literature” is not stipulatively restricted...
Philosophy is the study of the nature of existence, knowledge, and values. It involves analysis of the self, society, and the world. Philosophy seeks to address fundamental questions about reality, existence, and ethics.

Philosophy can be considered as a search for truth and understanding, aiming to answer questions about the nature of reality, existence, morality, and the meaning of life. Philosophical inquiry involves critical thinking, reflection, and dialogue. It encompasses various disciplines, including metaphysics, ethics, logic, and political philosophy, among others.

Philosophy is not bound by specific facts or empirical evidence, but rather by intellectual and conceptual frameworks. It seeks to explore the limits of human knowledge and understanding, often challenging conventional wisdom and established beliefs.

Philosophy is not only a means of acquiring knowledge but also a way of life, encouraging critical thinking, moral discernment, and personal reflection. It plays a crucial role in shaping individual and societal perspectives, influencing decisions and actions in various domains of life.

Philosophy is a continuous process of questioning and inquiry, supported by open-mindedness, curiosity, and a willingness to engage with different perspectives and ideas. It is an ever-evolving field, adapting to new challenges and opportunities as they arise in human experience.

In conclusion, philosophy is a fundamental aspect of human thought, providing a framework for understanding the world and our place in it. It invites us to reflect on the nature of reality, ethics, and values, encouraging critical thinking and intellectual growth.
Husserl and other phenomenologists are not concerned with meanings and values but with descriptions and eidetic essences.\textsuperscript{33} In his article, “The Conditions of the Question: What Is Philosophy?,” Gilles Deleuze tells us that “philosophy is the art of forming, inventing and fabricating concepts.”\textsuperscript{34} Moving further in the direction of Nietzsche, Deleuze says “philosophy more rigorously understood is the discipline that consists of creating concepts.”\textsuperscript{35} “[T]o create ever new concepts—this is the object of philosophy.”\textsuperscript{36} This is an important contribution to the conversation, and philosophers from various camps would nod approvingly at the inclusion of concepts in an account of philosophy. Still, rather than discovering, investigating, and interrogating concepts, Deleuze would have the philosopher fabricate and create them. Although no doubt it is true that much great and original philosophy has done just what Deleuze describes, it is hard to see how it is necessary. Much that has traditionally been considered philosophy would be excluded. As Deleuze says, “[philosophy] is neither contemplation, nor reflection, nor communication, even if it can sometimes believe itself to be one or the other of these because of the capacity of every discipline to engender its own illusions.”\textsuperscript{37} Although it would be fine to define philosophy stipulatively in these terms, and perhaps that is all Deleuze seeks to do, this will not work as the kind of definition we seek. Deleuze’s account stipulates that only what creates new concepts counts as philosophy, a normative condition that simply is not a necessary condition outside of this stipulative context. The creation of concepts will also not work as a sufficient condition for philosophy. Disciplines other than philosophy create concepts, psychology, and literature, for example.

Rather than stipulating the importance of concepts for philosophy, we could focus on some other concern instead. Russell and many Anglo-American partisans might insist that there is no philosophy without analysis (not necessarily analytic philosophy per se but analysis in a sense that would include Plato, Aristotle, et al.).\textsuperscript{38} Like Deleuze’s glorification of concepts, this worship of analysis can serve only to stipulate normatively the definition of philosophy, and this will not do for our purposes.

My position is that we cannot give a nonstipulative definition of philosophy in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Like other necessary-condition-family-resemblance terms, philosophy has a necessary, although not sufficient, condition. Among the intentions (which may be many and varied) of the author in producing philosophy must be, actually or counterfactually, the intention to produce a text\textsuperscript{39} that would fit within the application of the necessary-condition-family-resemblance term “philosophy.” This holds for the same reason that the counterpart intention to fit the resemblance holds in the case of literature. This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition, for if the text does not fit the resemblance despite the intention, it is not philosophy. Because the proper application of a necessary-condition-family-resemblance term, in this case “philosophy,” can never be conclusively settled, there is no hope of combining the caveat that the text must fit the resemblance with the necessary condition that it be intended to fit the resemblance. In combining these two demands we would simply be left with an account that is correct but that does not settle the matter in terms of a proper definition. The chief specification of the definition would rest on something that could not be conclusively settled: how we know if something appears to fit the resemblance.

This is not to suggest that we are in the dark when it comes to knowing what kind of things to look for in judging whether something fits the necessary-condition-family-resemblance of philosophy. There are characteristics to look for in judging whether something fits the resemblance of philosophy, but neither any single characteristic of philosophy nor any combination of characteristics yields a nonstipulative essential definition.

“Philosophy” as a necessary-condition-family-resemblance term potentially gives it a rather broad application; it is not restricted normatively like a stipulative definition. Still, there are two considerations to keep in mind with regard to the application of the term “philosophy” that keep it from becoming a vacuous notion. First, although philosophy is not stipulatively restricted by normative standards, this does not preclude us from talking of good and bad philosophy. Our necessary-condition-family-resemblance account does not specify in advance that all philosophy must be “good” in terms of standards all must adopt. The necessary-condition-family-resemblance of philosophy can be, and is, shared by even its black sheep and embarrassing uncles. We are free as individuals or as followers of a particular school to employ our own standards of what good philosophy is. For example, because they clearly are intended to, and actually do, fit the resemblance, the writings of Derrida and Searle are both correctly considered philosophy. We may differ in our evaluations of their writings, but that is another matter altogether.

The second consideration is that there can be (and are) texts that approach, but fall short of, or to the side of, being philosophy (texts that are “philosophy-like”) and other texts that can be read as philosophy although they are not philosophy. I would suggest that texts that fit either of these descriptions can aptly be called philosophical. The philosophical, then, is a broad category including texts that are “philosophy-like,” texts not intended to be philosophy that may still be fruitfully read as philosophy, and philosophy itself (it would be odd and mistaken to deny that an instance of philosophy is philosophical). So, if we were to agree that the latest physics textbook is not philosophy, we could still describe it as philosophical if there were sufficient reason to do so—for example, if it clearly gestured toward metaphysics. Also, if we were to agree that the Koran was not intended, even counterfactually, to fit the family resemblance of philosophy (whether or not
Are the short stories of Borges philosophy? We cannot hope to answer that question in the provocative way that he does in "Borges and Me," is the question that I want to explore here. The two men, in fact, were very different in their approach to philosophy and the nature of the questions they asked. Borges was a man of the mind, a philosopher of doubt, and a writer of the impossible. He was interested in the ways in which language can be used to construct new realities, and he was interested in the ways in which the human mind can be manipulated by language. Me, on the other hand, am a man of action, a writer of the possible, and a believer in the power of words to make things happen. I am interested in the ways in which language can be used to manipulate other people, and I am interested in the ways in which the human mind can be used to manipulate the world.

Borges's approach to philosophy is based on the idea that all knowledge is relative, and that there is no such thing as an absolute truth. He believed that the only way to know the world is to understand it from the perspective of the people who live in it. This means that we must consider the perspectives of all the people who live in the world, and we must consider the perspectives of the people who have lived in the world.

Me, on the other hand, believe that there is an absolute truth, and that we can know it by understanding the nature of the world. This means that we must consider the perspectives of all the people who live in the world, and we must consider the perspectives of the people who have lived in the world.

In this way, Borges and me are very different, and our approaches to philosophy are very different. However, we are both interested in the ways in which language can be used to manipulate the world, and we are both interested in the ways in which the human mind can be manipulated by language.
would result in differences in style. As the narrator tells us, “The contrast in styles is equally striking. The archaic style of Menard—who is, in addition, not a native speaker of the language in which he writes—is somewhat affected. Not so the style of his precursor, who employs the Spanish of his time with complete naturalness” (p. 94). The narrator also tells us that despite the affectation of Menard’s archaic language, his Quixote is actually superior to that of Cervantes. “Menard’s fragmentary Quixote is more subtle than Cervantes’. Cervantes cruelly juxtaposes the humble provincial reality of his country against the fantasies of the romance, while Menard chooses as his ‘reality’ the land of Carmen during the century that saw the Battle of Lepanto and the plays of Lope de Vega” (p. 93).

Menard’s Quixote, in its writing, points toward new ways of reading, given that his text is far less clear in its intention. As the narrator tells us, “The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer. (More ambiguous, his detractors will say—but ambiguity is richness)” (p. 94). Ambiguity, this celebrated virtue on which the poets thrive, is there in spades for the reader of Menard’s text. But why go through the trouble of the Menardian project? Who among us could hope to achieve it anyway? Why not simply read texts as if they were written by someone else? Haven’t Foucault and Barthes buried the author anyway? Aren’t readers free to read any text as if they were the author, or, if they prefer, as if someone else were the author? As the narrator tells us, “Menard has (perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique—the technique of delicate anachronism and fallacious attribution” (p. 95). Noticing the narrator’s parenthetical statement, we cannot be sure that Menard himself would approve of this new technique of reading, but it is already too late. Menard has opened Pandora’s box. Now a feminist need not rewrite Hamlet; she can simply read the text as if it were written by Judith Butler or Toni Morrison. A homosexual need not rewrite Zarathustra; he can simply read it as if its author were gay—and as if Zarathustra were seeking an erotic tryst with the Ubermensch. As the narrator tells us, “That technique, requiring infinite patience and concentration, encourages us to read the Odyssey as though it came after the Aeneid, to read Mme. Henri Bachelier’s Le jardin du Centaure as though it were written by Mme. Henri Bachelier. This technique fills the calmest books with adventure. Attributing the Imitatio Christi to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce—is that not sufficient renovation of those faint spiritual admonitions?” (p. 95).

I would not claim that Borges intended us to agree with the conclusions the narrator draws or those that the story points to, nor am I agreeing with them. Given his playful nature, I suspect Borges himself believed quite the opposite and would have had a hearty laugh at those who took his narrator seriously. Even the character Menard, we are told, often said the opposite of what he meant and believed. With regard to Menard’s invective against states the exact reverse of Menard’s true opinion of Valéry; Valéry understood this, and the two men’s friendship was never imperiled” (p. 99–100).

Clearly, “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” is philosophical in that it raises issues and asks questions that are of concern to philosophers. Any one of the issues would be a worthy subject for a journal article in the Philosophical Review. Still there is little more surprise in saying that one of Borges’s short stories is philosophical than there is in saying it is literary. The more pressing question is: Is “Pierre Menard” an instance of philosophy? To ask this question is, first, to ask whether it was intended to fit the necessary-condition-family-semblance of philosophy, and although I cannot say for certain, I suspect with good reason that it was not. Borges certainly read philosophy and had a love for and affinity with certain philosophers, but there is no indication that he regarded himself as a philosopher and, more importantly, there is no indication that he intended his “Pierre Menard” or other short stories to be philosophy. A writer of short stories would need to make clear that the stories were intended to be philosophy for them to be taken as philosophy. Otherwise the natural presumption of the reader is that they are literature, albeit philosophical literature, and so the author’s goal and intention would be thwarted.

As I admitted, it could be that I am wrong and that Borges did in fact intend his “Pierre Menard” to be philosophy. In that case “Pierre Menard” would fulfill the necessary condition of being philosophy; it would be a text intended by its author to fit the necessary-condition-family-semblance. This, however, would not be sufficient because the text would also have to actually fit the resemblance, which it does not. The short story is not ordinarily accepted as fitting the resemblance of philosophy; in fact, I know of no short story offered by its author and generally accepted as fitting the resemblance. “Pierre Menard” in particular does nothing to change that. It raises interesting and important philosophical issues, but it neither argues for, nor provides answers. I suspect, although I will not assert here, that we could say the same of Borges’s other ficiones. I could go on in saying why “Pierre Menard” does not fit the resemblance, but that would be to verge on the absurd. Simply recall what Simon argued, “Reasons can ordinarily be given for declining to apply a predicate to a particular case, to be sure, but they are always of a negative sort and do not differ in principle from why a cat is not called a primate or why a blackboard-eraser is not called an automobile.”

Let us not leave the labyrinth on a negative note, however. Although “Pierre Menard” is not philosophy, it is certainly philosophical. Given that Borges likely did not intend this short story to be philosophy, it is no criticism of it or him to say that it is not—no more than to say that it is not science. Nonetheless, Borges can, and perhaps should, be read by philosophers, and particularly students of philosophy—as he has the ability to awaken and excite
claim that literature is imaginative writing. According to Bloom, literature is "a means of expressing ideas that cannot be expressed in any other way." This is a common definition of literature, but Bloom goes further, arguing that literature is also a means of expressing "what is beyond the power of language to express." Bloom's definition is significant because it suggests that literature is not just a form of entertainment, but a way of exploring and understanding the human experience. This is a central theme in Bloom's work, and it is reflected in his approach to criticism, which focuses on the reader's response to a text, rather than the text itself.

Bloom's definition is also significant because it challenges the idea that literature is simply a means of conveying information. Bloom argues that literature is a form of "narrative" that is not just a means of conveying information, but a means of creating meaning. This is a key insight in Bloom's work, and it is reflected in his approach to criticism, which focuses on the reader's response to a text, rather than the text itself.

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be translated without producing a different work. In any event, Gracia’s account does not aim to provide essential definitions of “literature” and “philosophy.”


As he says, “philosophy is the attempt to construct an understanding of one’s experiences in the face of philosophy’s very cause for being—namely, ignorance” (p. 131). Cf. Anthony J. Cascardi on Borges’s take on philosophy, “Mimesis and Modernism: The Case of Jorge Luis Borges,” this volume, p. 27. Martin Wolfson, in “What Is Philosophy? The Journal of Philosophy 55 (1958), defines “original philosophy” as follows: “Every original philosophy is an autobiography. Thus to philosophize is to express one’s discontent with what is; to show that what was, or what is, was and is in error” (p. 323). Joseph Flay, in “What Is Philosophy?” *Personalist* 47 (1966), answers the question by citing “the following characteristics of philosophy: (1) It objects the activities of men and the conditions under which they take place; (2) the cultural matrix partially defines the orientation of the philosopher involved; (3) there is a continuity or historical nexus which links the philosophical systems of the various epochs in some way” (p. 212). To be fair, Flay seems to intend to give a description or explanation, not a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Archie Bahm, in “What Is Philosophy?” *The Scientific Monthly* 52 (1941), responds to the question by saying, “Philosophy is a kind of attitude, a kind of method, a group of problems, and a group of theories” (p. 553). He then proceeds to describe each of these elements of philosophy in loose and open-ended terms. Another possible way of defining philosophy is to distinguish it from literature by asserting that what is essential to philosophy is only ideas, not the texts that express those ideas. Whereas literature is essentially about texts, philosophy is essentially about ideas; cf. Gracia in this volume. In “Philosophy and Literature in Calvin’s Tales” Ermanno Bencivenga tells us that philosophy aims at disconnecting us from our ordinary contexts, demands truth, and leads to liberation, this volume.


37. Ibid., p. 474.


39. Using the term “text” rather loosely and including mental and spoken texts.

40. Cf. Knight, this volume p. 25.

41. Is work in the history of philosophy, philosophy? We cannot answer in the affirmative or negative in advance of considering the case in question. We must ask of the case at hand, was it intended to fit the resemblance of philosophy and does it fit the resemblance? Some cases are easy to answer in the affirmative; for example, whatever one’s judgment of Heidegger, it is clear that his *Being and Time* was intended to, and does, fit the resemblance. Other cases are easy to answer in the negative; for example, José Ortega’s *Erlanger Kindheit*. A *Novel about the History of Philosophy* was neither intended to, nor does it, fit the resemblance.
Borges’s Monsters:

Lois Parkinson Zamora