Philosophy and Cartoons: Their Relevance To Each Other

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Abstract: Our aim in this essay is to take a look at cartoons under philosophical light. What are some of the similarities between philosophy and the art of cartooning? In what ways can cartoons be helpful to philosophy? What are some of the problems cartoons pose for philosophy? Perhaps the most basic philosophical question concerning cartoons is, "What is a cartoon?". We argue that it is not easy to pin down necessary and sufficient conditions for something being a cartoon. We defend the view that cartoons form a class whose members are interconnected with the Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" relations. We then look into the problems involved in finding a connectionist parallel-processing correlate of the Wittgensteinian notion in the context of cartoons.
Keywords: Cartoon, Wittgenstein, family resemblace concepts, neural networks

Felsefe ve Karikatür: Birbirleriyle İlgileri

Özet: Bu yazının amacı karikatürü felsefi büyüteç altına almaktır. Felsefe ile karikatür sanatı arasında ne gibi benzerlikler bulunur? Karikatür felsefeye ne şekillerde yardımcı olabilir? Karikatüre özgü ne gibi felsefi problemler vardır? Felsefenin karikatür hakkında soracağı en temel soru herhâlde "Karikatür nedir?" sorusudur. Bir şeyin karikatür olmasının gerekli ve yeterli koşullarını bulmanın olası olmadığını savunuyoruz. Karikatürlerin Wittgenstein'cı anlamda "aile benzerliği" ilişkileriyle bir araya gelen bir sınıf oluşturduğunu söylüyor, böyle bir sınıfın üyelerini bir arada tutan şeyin bilişsel bilimlerdeki sinir ağı terimleriyle açıklanabilmesinin olanaklılığını sorguluyoruz.
Anahtar Sözcükler: Karikatür, Wittgenstein, aile-benzerliği kavramları, sinir ağları

Writing a philosophical essay on cartoons seems quite a challenge at first. One would have to try to relate two fields, cartooning and philosophy, which don't seem much related. Hence an essay that attempts to philosophize about cartoons might end up caricaturizing philosophy. But it shouldn't take long for one's initial misgivings to vanish. For if one could philosophize about sports, love, or sex—nowadays courses on these new "branches" of philosophy show up in the curricula of some serious philosophy departments—we, the authors of this essay, thought one could

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also philosophize about cartoons. For one thing, cartooning being an art form, perhaps philosophical attempts to understand cartoons should fall within the purview of the philosophy of art. At any rate, it wasn't surprising to find in the philosophical literature many articles related to cartoons, one of which was particularly interesting for our purposes here, as it was a substantial article entirely devoted to philosophical treatment of caricature[1].

Let us first ask, in what ways are philosophy and the art of cartooning related? Even a superficial look for a connection between the two reveals that the word 'philosophy' can be juxtaposed in several meaningful ways with the words 'cartoon' or 'caricature.'[2] First, one could caricaturize philosophy, as one could most everything else. Caricaturizing philosophy is not at all uncommon, and it is not done only by cartoonists or by foes of philosophy, either. Rodin's statue, which is a common symbol of philosophy, that you see caricaturally rendered in this essay is our own attempt to caricaturize philosophy.[3] Secondly, cartoons can be put at the service of philosophy, rather than in opposition to it or to ridicule it. For example,

[1] See, Ross (1974).

[2] The difference between a cartoon and a caricature is explained in Encyclopedia Britannica as follows: "While the caricaturist deals primarily with personal and political satire, the cartoonist treats types and groups in comedies of manners." (http://www.britannica.com/art/cartoon-pictorial-parody)

[3] We thank Soner Soysal for his help in creating the figure on the computer. We don't claim originality for the idea, as it seems to have occurred to many cartoonists.

cartoons can be exploited to make philosophy more attractive to students. A good example of the pedagogic hand that cartoons give to teaching philosophy is Donald Palmer's famous introductory text, Does the Center Hold?, which contains fantastic cartoons drawn by the author himself that make the book more fun to read.[4] Another example is the wonderful cartoon below drawn by the renowned philosopher Roderick Chisholm that displays the different positions in philosophy of mind.[5] There are many other books on logic and

philosophy that make use of cartoons. Thirdly, cartoons can be a medium for making philosophical points, as in those cartoons with a philosophical theme or philosophical message to convey. Peanuts, Calvin & Hobbes, and Garfield are well-known examples of comic strips occasionally making philosophical points. Fourthly, cartoons can look at philosophy under a humorous light—without, that is, ridiculing or caricaturizing philosophy.

[4] Palmer (1991). The 5th edition of this book has appeared in 2010.

[5] This widely known cartoon appears, for example, in Taylor (1963, p.13).

The Internet has links to many such cartoons.[6] Fifthly, one could *give a philosophical account of cartoons*, which is what we want to attempt to do in this essay.

Let us begin by noting that cartooning and philosophy share a significant characteristic. Cartoons typically use varying degrees of abstractness and symbolism. As we all know, some cartoon work can be highly abstract. And philosophy of course is famous (sometimes infamous) for being an abstract field of inquiry. So abstraction is a common feature of cartooning and philosophy. This is not to say that philosophical abstraction and cartoon abstraction are highly similar, but to point out that they both try to capture the "important" aspects of things. Philosophy and cartooning differ in what kinds of things they capture the abstract aspects of, and what they do with the abstract aspects that they captured.

What, if anything, are the problems of a philosophical nature that cartoons pose? Now, some things and activities pose a lot of philosophical problems and some hardly any. We could say that grass, clouds, razor blades, drum playing, cooking or horse racing pose little, if any, special philosophical problems and puzzles.[7] Cartoons, on the other hand, are philosophically more mysterious. Ross points to one of the mysteries: "That caricature succeeds at all seems paradoxical," at least at a first glance, because "caricature transforms exaggeration, distortion, and falsification into vehicles for succinct comment and easy identification." (p.285)

One question about cartoons would be, "When is a cartoon a good work of art and when is it tasteless, vulgar, or stupid?" What are the artistic criteria to be used in evaluating a cartoon? These are the kinds of questions that Aesthetics, which is a branch of philosophy, asks about works of art in general. What are the principles of cartoon aesthetics? Are there universal or objective standards that can distinguish between good and bad cartoon work? If it is impossible even in principle to come up with such standards—as some people may be inclined to believe—why

[6] https://www.google.com.tr/search?q=%22philosophical+cartoons%22&rlz=1C1ARABenTR475TR482&espv=2&biw=1024&bih=544&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=T2J3VYPLLsX2 UtmkgfAB&ved= 0CCEQsAQ&dpr=1.25.

[7] There may be room for some caution here, however, since we will recall that a couple of decades ago sports, sex, and environmental pollution were not regarded as worthy of philosophical theorizing, whereas today they are.

is that so? Is "cartoon taste" something entirely relative to persons, times and cultures, or can one be a realist or universalist about some norms concerning cartoon aesthetics?

Cartoons can give rise to worries about ethicality as well as aesthetic value. One question regarding the cartoon ethics is how much offense cartoons may be allowed to inflict. When does a person, society, race or religion have the right to protest against offensive content in a caricature and what measure or modes of protest are warranted? The prophet Mohammed cartoons that occasionally come out in some European countries which outrage many Islamic societies around the world make this issue a focus of very hot debate from time to time.

To put the matter at the level of the individual, people are offended a lot of times by cartoon representations of their body or character. It is interesting that, in general, we love to enjoy caricatures of others but far less enjoy those of ourselves. Isn't it morally wrong to indulge in caricatures of others while being intolerant against those of ourselves? (We usually display a similar inconsistency of attitude towards impersonators of ourselves versus impersonators of others.) Perhaps the reason why we readily laugh at the caricatures of others but are more touchy about our own caricatural depiction is because caricature is an excellent tool (along with the art of impersonation) to exaggerate and display one's weaknesses. But then, isn't this inconsistency of attitude a hypocrisy on our part? Our right to protest our own caricaturization has to be pitted against the caricature artist's freedom of expression and refusal of censure. Moral conflicts such as this are of interest to the branch of philosophy called Ethics.

Another point at which the roads of cartoons and philosophy cross is where the question of the mission of the art of cartooning arises. This question has ethical and social dimensions and is intertwined with the philosophical question of the mission of art in general.

A question regarding cartooning that might be of interest for philosophy of mind and Artificial Intelligence research would be whether it is possible to build computers that can create artful (as opposed to mechanically produced) cartoons. A related question is whether we can build computers and artificial intelligence machines which understand and appreciate cartoons (machines with a sense of humor!). Cartoon recognition and appreciation would be a stringent but reliable Turing test

of the presence of intelligence in any machine—and, for that matter, in any person.

Probably the most basic philosophical question to be raised about cartoons would be, "What is a cartoon?". If posed as a Socratic question, an answer to "What is a cartoon?" must capture the "essence" of cartoons. In more modern jargon, a Socratic question of the form "What is X?" is a demand to know the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be X. So what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be a cartoon; that is, what are those defining qualities which are found in all cartoons and only in cartoons, so that a list of those qualities would give us an exhaustive definition of the term 'cartoon'?

One of the characteristic features of cartoons is their being an economic form of representation: a cartoon brings off identification usually by very few simple lines and curves. Consider for instance this figure:  This is a cartoon depiction of a smiling face composed simply of a circle, a semicircle and two dots. Similar tools are used to create different effects in  ,  and  . The late Turkish cartoonist Turhan Selçuk used to draw the face of İsmet İnönü (an important Turkish statesman of the 20th century) like this:  . This is fascinatingly simple yet unmistakably identifiable (at least to the ones who lived during the times of İnönü). However, it seems that simplicity of depiction is not a universal feature of caricatures, nor is it necessarily a criterion by which a caricature is evaluated. Otherwise cartoonists would strive for the maximum degree of simplicity in creating their works. As we know, some cartoons embody elaborate lines and designs than others. Nor are all simple figures cartoons. Some highly simplified and stylized figures like  are not cartoons. Thus, simplicity is neither necessary nor sufficient for a figure to be a cartoon.

Most cartoons are humorous of course, but definitely not all of them. Humor or satire may be absent in a cartoon or a cartoon derivative such as comic strips. Some cartoons may be even scary, let alone being funny. One of the authors of this essay remembers that when he was a little child he used to be horrified by a caricature in one particular cartoon album.[8] Obviously he didn't find that cartoon humorous at all then. When he looks at that drawing today, he does classify it as a cartoon, like

[8] It is the caricature of a man with glasses that you see here. This caricature appeared in Sururi Karikatür Albümü (1950s).

everyone else, but he still doesn't find it humorous—although it gives him (slightly) less chills today than it used to. Hence, it would be incorrect to say that humor is a necessary condition for a drawing to be a cartoon. Nor is the value of a cartoon proportional to the degree of humor it contains. The relationship between cartoons and comedic value is not a simple, straightforward one.

Some other qualities which are usually found in cartoons are nevertheless not necessary elements of all cartoons. For example, exaggeration and distortion of some physical features of the subject, which is a popular technique of the cartoonist, is absent in the caricaturized Rodin statue above. Similarly, absurdity of the situation or of the message, or the surprise element does not universally accompany all cartoons. Even the physical material on which a cartoon is drawn also shows great variety. Cartoons can be displayed on TV or computer screens, or produced by holographic imaging, or carved on stones, as well as drawn on a piece of paper.

Thus it does not seem to be feasible to answer the question "What is a cartoon?" by giving a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for an object to be a cartoon.[9] The reason, we think, is that cartoons—like most everything else in the world—form a family-resemblance class.

[9] Ross also grapples with the questions "What is a caricature?" and "How is a caricature recognized?". She too rejects the idea that necessary and sufficient conditions can be given for something to be a caricature, but otherwise her analyses are different from ours.

The notion of "family-resemblance concept" is a Wittgensteinian idea. [10] Take Wittgenstein's example of the concept of "game." What is a game? Wittgenstein has these to say:

> 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? .... [I]f 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.... Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. — Are they all "amusing"? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? .... In ball games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck; and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of games like ring-a-ring-a-roses; here is the element of amusement, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way; can see how similarities crop up and disappear.
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> .... 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, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. — And I shall say "games" form a family.[11]

Wittgenstein's notion of family-resemblance relation can be explained in a little more formal terms as follows:

> There is a group of characteristics C_1, C_2, C_3 ... C_n that

[10] Wittgenstein's family-resemblance approach to categories is his solution to the age-old problem of universals in philosophy.

[11] Wittgenstein (1953, §66).

> games typically have. Among these characteristics are the following: C_1, there are rules that govern the activity; C_2, there is the possibility of winning; C_3, it is pleasant diversion; C_4, the players need to exercise certain skills; and so on. If *all* games had all of these characteristics, and *only* games did, then the word "game" would have a unitary meaning; the statement of its meaning would consist of a statement of the characteristics C_1 to C_n. One game may have only C_1, C_2 and C_7; another may have only C_1, C_3, C_6 and C_7; another only C_2, C_5, C_6; and so on. All that is required in order for something to be a game is that it have *some* of the cluster of game-characteristics C_1 to C_n, not that it have *all* of them.[12]

We believe that what is said above about games equally applies to cartoons: members of the class of cartoons are also related to one another by the family-resemblance relation.[13] Each member of this family (i.e. each cartoon) has a subset of the characteristics $C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_n$ which are sufficiently many for us to count it as a cartoon. It furthermore seems to us that the class of cartoons or caricatures of a certain person, say İsmet İnönü, also make up a family-resemblance class: every caricature of İnönü possesses sufficiently many of the relevant characteristics $C_{i1}, C_{i2}, \ldots, C_{ik}$. How many or what combinations of those characteristics are required in order for a piece of drawing to be regarded as a caricature of İnönü? It is hard to say a priori. To speak of games again,

> Not every combination of game-characteristics will do, of course: for example, it is not enough that something have only characteristic C_2 (the possibility of winning) in order to qualify for gamehood. In wars and duels and debates, there is the possibility of winning, but none is a game. There is no way of specifying ahead of time and in the abstract just how much *is* enough; it would be absurd to suggest, for instance, that in order for an activity to be properly counted as a game, it is a necessary and sufficient

[12] Pitcher (1964, p.220) (quoted in Hospers (1988, pp.121-122.)

[13] Many, probably most, concepts are family-resemblance concepts. Forms of art and even philosophical problems and theories make up family-resemblance classes according to Palmer, and we quite agree with him. The notion of family resemblance is illustrated by Palmer with a lovely cartoon on p.30, which attests to how pedagogically helpful cartoons can be in explaining philosophical concepts and ideas.

> condition that the activity have some combination of four or more of the C_n [should have been 'n'] game-characteristics. It might well be that some activities that have only three game-characteristics are without doubt games, and that others which have five are not.[14]

One complication the above analysis entails is that whether a picture with any given subset of the relevant characteristics is to be counted as a caricature of İnönü will depend on the viewer of the drawing. The characteristics $C_{\dot{1}3}$, $C_{\dot{1}7}$ and $C_{\dot{1}25}$ may suffice for someone to perceive a drawing as a caricature of İnönü, but it may not induce a similar perception in another person; because, let us say, the second person does not know İnönü as well as the first one does. Even for the same viewer, caricature recognition may conceivably change from time to time. One day the presence of the characteristics $C_{\dot{1}3}$, $C_{\dot{1}7}$ and $C_{\dot{1}25}$ may lead someone to perceive a drawing as a caricature of İnönü, but the next day it may not.

It seems to us that the question of the conditions of cartoon perception or recognition can more properly be dealt with by empirical sciences such as cognitive science than by philosophy. We feel that these questions will ultimately be answered by brain research. By explaining the neuro-physiological conditions and mechanisms of how we recognize something as a cartoon (indeed, how we recognize something to be an X), the results of such research should provide a more satisfactory answer to the question "What is a cartoon?"

One possible direction brain research on this matter can take is to correlate the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblance with the neural network structures in the brain. It is one hot focus of research in the current cognitive science with a sizeable literature having accumulated on it. According to the so-called connectionist (or parallel distributed processing) models, in perceptual recognition of various instances of something as an instance of that thing, the activities in the relevant parts of the neural network in one's brain converge toward a certain "*attractor" state.*[15] Thus, when that person observes different instances of game, the cognitive processes in her neural network stabilize at a certain attractor—which enables her to categorize all those different instances of game into

[14] Pitcher (1964, p.220) (quoted in Hospers (1988, p.122.)

[15] An attractor network is a type of dynamical network which settles to a stable pattern over time. The final pattern the network settles to is called the attractor state.

the single category of "game." Thus, a chess game, a football game, a hide-and-seek game, etc. belong to the same category—in Wittgenstein's words, they are members of the same family-resemblance class—in virtue of the fact that observation of each member by a person can initiate a brain process that precipitates into the same attractor state in the brain of that person. This is, in essence, the connectionist family-resemblance theory of categories in cognitive science.

This theory would seem to have a natural extension to cartoon perception or recognition: when someone views any cartoon of a specific person, say İnönü, the relevant processes of her brain may evolve towards some attractor state $A_{İ}$. In that case, as far as she is concerned, the necessary and sufficient condition of something being an İnönü cartoon could be stated as follows: X is a cartoon of İnönü if and only if its observation yields in her brain the attractor state $A_{İ}$. And, at an upper level of generality, her viewing of *any cartoon* may be producing in her brain a certain attractor state A_C. If that is right, then the necessary and sufficient condition of something being *a* (any) cartoon for her is that its observation takes her brain to the attractor state A_C.

But the neural-network theory of categories in this context does not seem without problems. For one thing, how would the state $A_{İ}$ be related to state A_C? Since the cartoons of İnönü form a subfamily of the larger family of cartoons, what would make A_C, which is a neural state, represent (or correlate with) a *more general* family than $A_{İ}$, which is another neural state? In other words, how can one neural state, which is really a bio-chemical state of the brain, represent something more general than another neural state, which is another bio-chemical state of the brain? The relation between $A_{İ}$ and A_C cannot simply be that A_C is more general or more comprehensive than $A_{İ}$, because it doesn't make sense to say that one bio-chemical state is more general or more comprehensive than another bio-chemical state.

If an answer to the problem of what a cartoon is to be sought in the connectionist approach to categories, there is another problem that needs to be solved. Suppose that when someone looks at different cartoons on different occasions, her brain settles down into some attractor state on each one of the occasions—call them A_{C1}, A_{C2}, A_{C3}, etc. Now, do these attractor states have some elements which are shared by *all* of these states and *only* by these states? Or do the states A_{C1}, A_{C2}, A_{C3}, etc. form

a family-resemblance class, instead? If the answer is that they form a family-resemblance class, the connectionist theory would have failed to account for the family-resemblance relation among all cartoons, for such an account would be circular!

Until these and other problems that may arise are solved, the answer to the question "What is a cartoon?" provided in terms of the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblance is perhaps the best answer *philosophy* can come up with.

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