

1

Wittgenstein's iPod, or, the Familiar Among Us

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The white earbuds give us all away. Some of us, the ones who like to have it all hang out, have gone for the lanyard earphones for the Nano, displaying the iPod mobile digital device on our chest like a less-than-ironic cross. Others tuck theirs into a pocket, with only the white cables signaling their devotion. Some carry the clip-on, colorized Shuffle as a badge of honor. All of us are, however, recognizable.

Even dangerously so. At one point, police chiefs in the United States asked kids not to wear the Jobs-sanctioned headphones, as recognition led to redistribution—as in having your iPod jacked and redistributed to someone less fortunate but more “entrepreneurial.” So being familiarly adorned with the accouterments of the iPod can lead to many things, not all of them good. However, the iPod itself will always already be a *familiar* sign, an easily deciphered part of the wearer. It is, for want of a better notion, part of the family of modern man.

The notion of *being familiar* is not altogether simple. It is one of those words and ideas that we all instantly recognize—it is familiar to us, after all—but it is far less clear exactly how it works. What exactly is it that we recognize in the iPod? The shape? The color? The coolness factor? And how come we can recognize the funky clip of the iPod Shuffle as being related to the decidedly different iPod Touch? Is there an “iPodness” that we can recognize, and what does this consist of? How come we so immediately become accustomed to the darned things?

Regardless of what it is, we cannot escape the fact that the iPod creates a familiarity. Much like we could earlier seek comfort in the

fact that no matter where in the world you went, you could see the golden arches of McDonald's and be re-assured that there was something you would know, something familiar, we can now travel to the far reaches of the earth and say "It has to be somewhat civilized, that guy with the machete is listening to his iPod." When I walk the streets of my own city, listening to Bill Hicks on my black, lanyarded Nano, I can see others in the iPod-family pass by and smile knowingly. Some have old, beat-up 2Gs, others the "little fatty." I can feel slightly superior to the former and envious of the latter, but still feel we all belong to the family of Steve's Greatest Gift, all connected and recognizable. Maybe it is because we through it become part of the Family of Mac (as in "Cult of," not as in "related to" cool but weird Uncle Steve). And this is what fascinates me. Hold on, I'll try to explain why.

"Hey, You Got an iPod!"

Much has been made of the iPod's exterior. The white box, the wheel, and the aforementioned earbuds have become both icons and the butt of numerous jokes. However, lest we forget, the iPod doesn't even exist anymore, at least not as something you can buy from Apple. Sure, some may have the old, original iPod in a drawer somewhere, but the iPod is a rapidly changing beast. At the moment of writing, the closest thing to the original, "real" thing would be the "iPod classic", a sleek music machine that comes in black or light gray, with an integrated Click Wheel controller and a new interface (Cover Flow).

If we were to compare this to the original iPod, several things stand out. The original (not the "Classic") had a small black-and-white screen, a physical wheel that collected grime, bulky buttons around this wheel, and the iconic white surface. If we compare this to the iPod Classic, the direct similarities are not that clear. Yes, there is the positioning of the elements – the screen above, the wheel below, both occupying about 50% of the front (with the screen getting somewhat less). The wheel is still round, and the proportions are about the same. We can somehow discern that the design is in fact the same, even though the elements that create it have noticeable differences.

This feeling of comfortable recognition does not stop at the little white box (now no longer white) itself. We can use the idea of the iPod to talk about a lot of things. Companies refer to them-

selves as wanting to be the “iPod of,” for example, software or machinery. Particularly beautiful products are referred to as “the iPod of,” for example, toilets [*sic*]. There seems to be an “iPodness” that other companies covet, a kind of guaranteed quality and style that can be borrowed from the music-box of St. Jobs. But when someone refers to a particularly elegant faucet as “the iPod of taps,” he or she obviously don’t mean that the faucet has a small screen and a click-wheel (at least not yet). Instead there seems to be some more abstract quality that connects all things elegant and covetable into a universe of iPod-like things—an iPodness hovering over the world.

There seems to be at least two different familiarities operating here. On the one hand the physical qualities of the iPod, creating a sense of shared design and inherited style. On the other hand, the more abstract quality of being like an iPod in coolness factor, (desired) rate of adoption, and overall ease-of-use. The family seems to accommodate both those that look alike and those who just seem to fit in. Things can obviously be familiar in many different ways, but the way in which this is created differs. To make a tortured analogy, some men date women who look like their mothers, others date women who behave like their mothers. We all have issues.

Why Has Jonathan Such a Big Nose?

It can be really difficult to explain what a person looks like, but it is even more difficult to explain what a family looks like. Still, we are very good at discerning such similarities. In the same way, it is really difficult to explain what is meant by a sport, as, for example, water polo has very few things in common with boxing, yet they both are sports (unlike curling, for which there is simply no explanation). We rarely have difficulty identifying something as a sport, even when we really cannot explain why we think it is. For instance, there seem to be sport-like qualities to cricket, yet I cannot for the life of me figure out what they might be. Maybe it’s in the clothes. This problem, which is a problem of definitions, has occupied many thinkers but maybe none so much as Ludwig Wittgenstein.

For how do you define an iPod? It comes in many forms and kinds, and is becoming almost a template with which one can discuss a number of things. Not all iPods have screens, and with the

iPhone and the iPod touch, not all have click-wheels either. With the iPhone, the capacity to play music is starting to blend into the background as yet one more function, and with a Shuffle, you might not even know what music is on there. And “thing I own that among other things plays some of the songs I’ve downloaded” sounds like a somewhat awkward definition. Even if we were to discount the abstract, almost-likes, it is clear that creating a perfect definition is very difficult, possibly impossible. Wittgenstein battled with the same issue, but also presented a rather ingenious solution to it all. Rather than hunt for the perfect definition, he says, we should observe how similar things can be grouped together by their “family resemblances.”

In a family, not everyone looks alike. Still, there tends to be a set of similar features, distributed across the family. Some might have dad’s eyes but not his mouth, others mom’s hair but not her build. Two people from the same family might look very little like each other, but still obviously be from the same family—for instance so that a sister might have Dad’s eyes and Mom’s mouth, whereas a brother might have Dad’s mouth and Mom’s eyes. They are unlike each other, but share in the greater set of family resemblance. There is, in families and in the world in general, a situation so that “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,”¹ and our work should focus on tracing this rather than looking for absolute general certainties. We need to look for connections and overlaps, tendencies and similarities, not some essential, eternal thing. Your father’s nose may be a prominent thing, majestic in size and tagged on both Flickr and Google Earth, but that does not mean that your family is defined by that nose, or that this is what makes the people in your family look like each other. At least according to Wittgenstein.

What does this mean for looking at the iPod? Well, obviously there are quite a few resemblances within even its more limited family. A Shuffle has a click-wheel, but no screen. A “Touch” has only a screen. A “Classic” has both, and the new Nano (“little fatty”) is a small version of a Classic. It would perhaps be easiest to say that the Classic is the fundamental, essential form, and all the others versions of it. The Touch has evolved into one direction, the

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), §66, p. 31.

Shuffle into another, and they both share in the general familiarity of the gold standard of the “real” one. In one way this isn’t so strange, as the word “classic” does connote a standard of some sort. But how does something get to be a standard? And how does this work in practice?

Meet the Fockers

The difficult thing in assessing the iPodness of the iPod is the realization that there might be no such thing, at least not in any essential sense. Instead, there are a number of things that we look for, a number of vaguely defined things that we relate to each other into a kind of lattice we can attach our understandings to. Trying to philosophically come to grips with the problem of recognition thus means that we are not only talking about the iPod, we are talking about ourselves as well.

Many iPod aficionados have commented on the fact that the first time one comes across the beloved box, one feels almost instantly drawn to it. The surface, the user interface, the experience itself—amplified if one is standing in an Apple Store—all seem to communicate friendliness and that there is no barrier between the user and the music. The iPod is not only easy to use, it is in a sense familiar before the fact. Much has been made of this, and although there are a few minor issues which seem less than logical—having to press Play and keep it down in order to shut the iPod off seems somewhat counter-intuitive—the logic and orderly set-up makes the user feel familiar-with-use in a very short period of time. Like a friend you haven’t had contact with since college, but who you can “sync” with immediately, Steve’s Gift to Us All seems almost insidious in the way it can infiltrate our cynical barriers.

Apple has very consciously worked at keeping this so. If we take the newest interface, Cover Flow, this becomes even more apparent. Rather than flicking through a series of folders, presented in a list, we can flick through album covers in a lovely approximation of the real thing. It is as if you were there! It’s just like going through the stacks at the old record-store, except you can’t flirt with the girl in the other aisle! It’s like going through a friend’s rack of LPs! (Note that the Cover Flow experience is specifically geared towards the memories of those old enough to remember LPs . . . You know, Steve’s generation.) Only it’s not. Not by a long shot. No one has ever gone through albums in the manner of Cover

Flow, as most albums do not float weightlessly in space, moving fluidly as you guide your fingers across the great mass of them. The experience of Cover Flow is in fact completely alien, physically impossible in the real world and in a sense never-before-seen. Yet it seems an *instantly familiar* experience, completely understandable and logical. How can this be? How can we recognize something that is not only strange, but literally impossible, as familiar?

It would seem that familiarity does not require recognition. Rather, familiarity requires for us to be able to find enough little hints and similarities in order for us to create a conceptual family of likenesses—so that Cover Flow and the more traditional box of albums get to share in the familiar act of flicking through. Familiarity would then be not a thing pre-existing in the world, but something that humans form in their making sense of the world. It would be a human creation, not an innate thing.

On the Go in Boise

One of the things that make the iPod such a friendly companion might be that it makes it very easy to create familiarities. In fact, one of the built-in games on the newer models even automates this. The “Music Quiz” game plays you a song, and your task is to recognize it as quickly as you can. Well, not really recognize, but rather guess as well as you can from an offered list of possibilities while the clock is ticking down. The game assumes you are already familiar with your music, and uses this to turn your own collection of music into a game. If you are good at the game you are awarded with points, but also with a feeling of order, as you clearly are able to recognize that which should already be familiar to you—a familiarity made new and fed back to you. Within the box, the familiar can be endlessly recreated.

Playlists are of course one of the most important ways to do this. Rather than trusting the chaos of all your songs, or the shuffle-function (which is an entirely different thing), you set up your playlists in iTunes, and the trusty synchronization feature makes it possible to transfer this familiar way of ordering your music onto your iPod. You can then either trust these ready-mades, or take a walk on the wild side and create a new (but reassuringly familiar) playlist from the already present material.

Sync(hronization) itself is a technology of familiarity. Even though your iMac (or, Steve forbid, your PC) is very unlike your

iPod, syncing the two makes them familiar to each other. Your contacts come along, identical on the two machines, as do your images (of your family, no doubt) and so on. Sync, of any kind, creates familiarity between two devices, and the touted seamlessness of the iPod's syncing points towards an age when all devices might be "familiar." This obviously raises the specter of another way to use the word, as a familiar can also denote a spirit (often inhabiting the form of an animal) who serves a witch. Maybe our technological age has gone beyond the use of animals in this respect . . . (What is that you say, Nano of mine? I can't tell them about you? But I don't want to ki . . . Sssch, I'm writing this now, okay?)

This then makes it possible to make the entire world familiar to you. Regardless of whether you're having a huckleberry pie in Boise or eating bibimbap in Korea, you can rest easy knowing that as long as you have your iPod, you always have a familiar soundscape to metaphorically lean on. In a manner not unlike the comfort of knowing that a Big Mac is the same everywhere in the world, the iPod can make any place seem less strange, less different. The co-branded system of Nike+iPod has a more extreme version of this, allowing the user to set a "PowerSong"—a song you can call up when you need an extra boost in motivation. Rather than serving up a list of songs, this enables the user to have an instantly recognizable (and completely unsurprising) song come up at the touch of a button. Again, whether you're jogging in Central Park, or biking in Stockholm, the iPod can make the environment familiar.

To See the World in a Clickwheel

This potential for universalizing our experiences has been one of the things people criticize in the iPod. If you are going to shield yourself from the differences in the world just by putting on the white buds and sticking to your predefined playlists, why even go to foreign places? The banality of shutting yourself within the iPod's aural familiarity would seem to be something like an *evil* side of familiarity. Where the act of making familiar seems to be a good thing when we are fundamentally lost—not understanding what is going on and looking for clues to make sense of things—ready-made familiarity seems to make the world more distant and unimportant.

What, in effect, is it that we do when we turn up our "Foreign Lands" playlist in a place unknown to us? In the simplest sense, we

replace foreign and alien sounds with familiar ones. We choose not to completely give in to the experience of being somewhere foreign, and instead combine the new sensations we get through sight and touch (and smell, particularly so if we're in Paris) with the reassuringly familiar sounds emanating from our chosen mechanism of distancing ourselves.

If we're lucky, we might even come across something as familiar as an Apple Store, and be able to stand in a foreign city, listening to music we chose back home, looking at a new iPod in the shop window, instantly familiar to us. Here, though, we see two slightly different kinds of familiarity. The music, our lived experience with the iPod, is familiar because the iPod is a machine that creates these kinds of familiarities. The iPod in the window is familiar because we have created ways of looking at the world within which the iPod stands as a symbol through which we can understand things. Many things.

I Know You'll Like This

To state that the iPod is universally familiar might be a bit of an exaggeration, but not a huge one. The little white box that is no longer white is sold all over the globe, and used by American farmers as well as Russian middle managers. If you walk through an electronics market in China, you will be inundated with offers to buy copies and clones of it. You can find it being sold in every airport, sometimes even in vending machines, and it turns up as a prize in lotteries around the world. But the global iPod is not the whole story.

To engage with an iPod also means that you become part of a universalized experience. Not only do you become part of the general family of the iPod, recognizable in the street, but also entangled in a set of understandings that tries to make you familiar to both your iPod and to the system behind it. While we are used to thinking that information-gathering and the manufacture of systemic meaning are human endeavors, the fact is that the iPod also tries to make you familiar to it. For instance, the iPod tracks the number of times you've played a specific song and encourages you to rate the songs you have on it. This information is then used to make better guesses about what to play back to you, for instance so that higher rated songs, and songs you like to play, are more likely to turn up when you shuffle songs.

Although it might seem aphiloosophical to ascribe agency to a music player, this kind of thinking has been quite popular in, for example, the Actor-Network Theory of people like Bruno Latour and John Law.

Here, in ANT, the radical claim was that agency was not only something that humans had, but that machines or technology also exhibited the same. Rather than just study the world as expressions of human wants and desires, ANT argued for taking the technological network and the things themselves into account, on their own terms. This infuriated some people, who accused this line of thinking of being willfully obscurantist and little more than a cobbled set of superficial frippery placed to cover up a shambolic core (a little like Microsoft Vista, in this regard), but it did manage to being the technological object back into the analytic spotlight.

Even though we might shy away from saying that the iPod could choose to act in certain ways (and not in others), it isn't so far-fetched to say that objects act, and that they limit or enable our actions in specific ways—with the iPod certain things become possible that otherwise would not, and the iPod also sets behavioral limits for how we act. Just like an ATM can handle only one person or transaction at a time and therefore makes us stand in line to take out money, the iPod increasingly makes choices for you. Granted, you can disable this, but who among us hasn't trusted the shuffle function from time to time? Part of the way in which an object such as the iPod becomes familiar and universalized is that the technological rules and limits of the object "trains" us into specific behaviors, so that we know how to flick our fingers or turn the click-wheel in the correct way, and thus integrate ourselves into the iPod's life-world. But then again, this is true of all technology, and even though seeing towards how specific interactions with the object become familiar to us can teach us something, it is only part of the bigger picture.

We could perhaps say that the iPod is hardwired to become friendly with you, and programmed to make itself familiar to you. But this is not all. If we look at the extensions of the iPod, such as the iTunes-software and the related iTunes Store, the attempt to tie the user of the iPod into a web of familiarity is greatly enhanced. Attempting to buy, for example, a song by Sly and the Family Stone will instantly lead to being suggested "Top Songs" and push you towards "Listeners Also Bought." In further extension, the logic is that the more you buy, the better the system will know you (you

will become familiar to the universal iPod system) and the better it will be able to serve you.

So maybe it is not you becoming familiar with the iPod, but the iPod becoming familiar with you?

The Familiar Familiar

So who is really familiar to whom? And what is being familiar or made familiar? Maybe, in the tradition of a “normal” family (whatever that is), familiarity involves a complex negotiation of relationships and a fluid line between who is family and who isn’t. In fact, just as there really isn’t anything like a “normal family” in the world, just different kinds of actual families, there is no “iPod” either, not any longer (once there was, but now we have a family that somehow shares a familiar iPodness). This would in fact correspond well to Wittgenstein’s general theory of knowledge, as he tended to be wary of well-defined concepts. Paraphrasing him, we could say that it seems a little insane to claim that just because it is difficult to draw the line exactly where family ends and a more general kinship begins, families aren’t real. Actually, he said “Many words . . . don’t have a strict meaning. But this is not a defect. To think it is would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary,”² but still.

We could thus say that, in the iPod, we have quite a few different familiarities. On the one hand, the iPod has become a familiar symbol to us, so familiar in fact that we use it to talk about other things, which then in their turn could be seen as parts of the greater iPod family. Or at least hang-around members, for lest we forget, in the contemporary economy there are few things more desirable than being similar to the iPod. On the other, the iPod can be used to create familiarity where there is none, such as when running in an unfamiliar terrain or when traveling in foreign lands. By being portable and by making it possible to customize experiences, the iPod is something akin to a digital security blanket.

On the third hand (for many, the quality of philosophy can only properly be measured by the amount of hands involved—and philosophy doesn’t care if you’ve only got two), the iPod tries very hard

² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 27.

to make itself familiar to you. It imports things from your computer, it tries to learn from you, and it is positioned as an unintrusive and wholly intuitive little buddy. That technology can show this kind of agency sometimes feels quite eerie, but we should pay heed to it, as it questions exactly who is getting familiar with whom. Clearly, the iPod is also a way for Apple to be more familiar with you, but we'll leave the issues of integrity for another chapter.

So not only are there many ways to be familiar, there are many familiars as well. Sound familiar?

On the Heresy of the Zune

But what about things that seem familiar, but shouldn't be? With a product as successful as the little white box (which still isn't quite as white any longer), there will be copies and attempts to mimic the form, function and fabulousness of the thing we know and love. How should we understand these?

The anti-iPod, as it were, must be the Microsoft Zune. Any Mac-fan worth his or her salt will instantly react to the mention of this monstrosity with derision and scorn. Although it looked somewhat similar, it was clearly an alien, evil intrusion. It was bigger, it was differently colored, and most importantly, created in the forges of Hell. It was both familiar and clearly wrong, a both-and. We might even compare it to a zombie³—recognizably both human and horribly non-human.

True, the Zune might eat your soul instead of your flesh (unlike that shambling, flesh-eating monster Steven Ballmer, who'll eat both), but it was still clearly an evil presence—an abomination unto the One True Steve. The truly evil thing about it was not that the Evil Empire created it, but that it so clearly tried to look like the iPod. It took a lovely familiar thing, and created a perverse replica of it, something like a deranged Elvis-impersonator with extensive plastic surgery and a welded-on automatically rotating artificial pelvis (but not as cool). It was familiar, but clearly had no right to be. Just as Windows Vista looks like what would happen if OS X got drunk and started projectile vomiting, the Zune looks like an iPod in particularly ill-advised drag, making this specific case of familiarity threatening and abject.

³ See Richard Greene and K. Silem Muhammad, eds., *The Undead and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2006).

In fact, this twisted familiarity did create an admirable play on recognition and the iPod-Zune dichotomy. Owing to the similarity in use and difference in size, a way to create Zune replicas out of regular paper printed with the image of this hellspawn was quickly distributed on the net, with the following ostensible use: By making a replica Zune, and hiding one's iPod within it, one could achieve a one-two familiarity punch. By making the iPod look less familiar through masquerading it as another familiar thing, the Zune, one could (arguably) make it less desirable to thieves. This play with familiarities again shows that recognition is not an entirely neutral thing . . . We might even here see a politics of familiarity. Luckily, there is no time to delve into this (as we would then be too close to comfort for a bevy of Derrida's hairier discussions). Let it just be said that familiarity is not easy, even when it works.

What Was on Wittgenstein's iPod?

There's a fun game you can play with your friends or your iPod (whichever is dearest to you) in which one tries to imagine what songs would be on the most-played playlist of famous people. Imagining the potential playlists of people like the Pope⁴ or Andrew Jackson makes it possible for us to make these people seem a little less abstract. Or at least show off how familiar we are with them. So what would be on Wittgenstein's iPod?

My guess is that it would have quite a lot of modern classical on it, from which you could infer that he liked atonal music. But I also think he'd have a bunch of simple beerhall tunes on there, and possibly a few British music hall pieces (like "I'm 'Enery the Eighth, I Am"), things that made him feel good and which could balance the odd soundscapes that form such great backgrounds to his philosophy. He'd sit there, listening to Schoenberg and being one with his philosophy, and then switch to a rousing "Krakauer Polka" and feel a little more at home.

⁴ *Editor's note.* Pope Benedict XVI apparently actually does have an iPod—a 2GB white Nano. At one time at least, it contained Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, and Stravinsky, as well as a few podcasts, including a radio drama about St. Thomas Becket and a feature on Pope Pius XI's creation of Vatican Radio. See Carol Glatz, "Vatican Radio Employees Present Pope with Specially Loaded iPod Nano," *Catholic News Service*, March 3rd, 2006, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0601282.htm> (accessed March 12th, 2008).

It just goes to show that familiarity is not one singular thing. Rather, when we talk about familiarity we in fact talk about several different things, phenomena that share some family likenesses but which are not easily reducible to one single thing. Familiarity can be about recognition, but it can also be about substituting recognition. It can be about similar things, or just about seeing similarities where there really are none—familiarity as parsimony in sense-making. Put an iPod Mini (the colorful and chubby version that preceded the Nano) next to an iPod Touch, and very few things seem to unite them. Still, as humans, we are very good at connecting the few family resemblances they do show in such a way to make them seem similar.

Compare the familiarity of listening to the Beach Boys' classic "Wouldn't It Be Nice" while in Kabul to the sensation of seeing a new iPod for the first time in your favorite store. There is almost nothing that unites these two things, yet both share in some sensation of familiarity. What the iPod does, and what is fantastic about it, is that it creates not one but a bunch of potential familiarities. The impossibility of clearly defining these, and the obviousness of them still being somehow connected, is as good an illustration as any of how Wittgenstein tried to move philosophy away from being too enthralled with exact definitions, and how he instead argued that we need to celebrate natural language and the multitude of (language) games we play. The iPod can be used in many ways, just like language can. Personally, I like to think that Wittgenstein would have loved an iPod. And I think he would have gone for the same look I prefer—black Nano, lanyard headphones. Showing off, yet utterly practical. Like philosophy, really.