Hacker on Wittgenstein's Ethnological Approach

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P. M. S. Hacker, in his essay "Wittgenstein's Anthropological and Ethnological Approach"[1], comments on Wittgenstein's remark:

> If we use the ethnological approach, does that mean we are saying that philosophy is ethnology? No, it only means that we are taking up our position far outside, in order to see things *more objectively*.[2]

Hacker links this remark to what he considers to be a change in Wittgenstein's philosophical outlook around the beginning of the 1930's, from the point of view of the *Tractatus*, according to which philosophy was an investigation into the essence of the world, to that of the later philosophy, according to which "the task of philosophy is to investigate the uses of words that are the source of conceptual problems and confusions"[3]. I shall not address the question whether this construal of Wittgenstein's development is adequate – according to some writers, the transition from the period of the *Tractatus* to that of the *Philosophical Investigations* is not so sharp as Hacker makes it out to be. What I wish to discuss, however, are some points concerning Hacker's reading of the idea of an ethnological approach. I shall start by discussing, and agreeing with, Hacker's claim that in philosophy language is described from an internal point of view. After that, I shall make some critical comments about Hacker's use of the word "concept", especially in connection with language learning. Finally, I address what appears to me to be an obscure point about Hacker's idea of philosophical clarification.

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[1] Hacker, 2010.
[2] Wittgenstein ****
[3] Hacker, 2010, 17.

An internal vs. an ethnological point of view

Hacker's presentation is lucid, and there is much in his essay that I agree with. Thus, a remark I find important is the following:

> it is the normative practices of the speech community that fix and hold firm the internal relations between a word and its application, between explanation of meaning and what *counts,* in the practice of using the word, as correct use, as well as what is determined as *following from* its use in an utterance.[4]

This point, as I understand it, might also be made by saying that it is through speakers' responses to utterances that distinctions such as that between correct and incorrect enter into language. The misunderstanding we need to guard against is that we could base a description of correct use on neutral observations of the linguistic behaviour of the members of a speech community. That such an attempt could not achieve its purpose is clear from the fact that someone who does not herself have command of the language would not be able to tell what would be the relevant linguistic features, indeed, would have no way of distinguishing speech from other forms of behaviour. When Quine argues that the analytic/synthetic distinction cannot be upheld[5], the reason for this seems to be that he considers observation of behaviour the sole source of judgments about meaning. Observation gives no basis for distinguishing between assent based on conceptual relations and assent based on agreement concerning empirical fact. However, if neutral observation were all that is allowed, we could not even get as far as Quine assumes. We need what Hacker calls an internal point of view; if that is granted, however, Quine's reason for questioning the analytic/synthetic distinction dissolves.[6] On the other hand, as will be seen, I have some disagreements with the way Hacker construes that point of view.

Historicism without history

Hacker's point about Wittgenstein's approach involving historicism without history is also illuminating, while at the same time giving rise to some questions. Hacker writes:

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[4] Hacker, 2010, 19.
[5] Quine, 1963.
[6] There are other reasons for questioning the distinction, but I shall not go into them here.

> The concepts employed by different linguistic and social groups are the product of social interaction, responses to shared needs … common interests called forth by the varying circumstances of social life (p. 5).

Attending to the social circumstances of linguistic interaction is an important corrective to more traditional forms of philosophical analysis, in which one tends to focus narrowly on words or sentences considered, as it were, by themselves. Wittgenstein exhorts us to step back and attend to the situations in which those sentences have a role in conversation. This, however, should not be confused with a factual inquiry, aimed at finding an account of how culture has given rise to those forms of expression. What one is attempting to do, rather, is to get a clearer understanding of the senses of words in their actual use, so as to counteract the philosophical tendency to misconstrue their sense in accordance with certain preconceived ideas. This, I take it, is why Hacker speaks about a historicism *without* history.

However, when Hacker speaks about concepts being the *product* of social interaction, this way of putting matters is liable to mislead. It suggests that one is speaking about a relation between two separate terms, the forms of interaction on the one hand and the concepts on the other hand. This misses the point that the relation in question is internal: it is only in the context of social interaction that concepts are what they are. Only when they have a role in human intercourse can words uttered be said to express a sense. Or better put: to speak of the sense of words is to speak of what speakers do in uttering them. In short, the important dependence here is logical, not historical.

What there is to be done in uttering words is bound up with the forms of human interaction that exist in the speakers' society. Reflecting on possible or actual cultural variations may be an important aid in trying to overcome philosophical confusion, since it helps free us from the idea that, as Wittgenstein puts it, in a passage quoted by Hacker, "certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones"[7], and thus helps us turn the

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[7] *PPF*, § 366. References to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* will be given with *PI* and section number, references to "Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment" (previously known as Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*) with *PPF* and section number.

focus of our attention from the world we speak about to the things we do in speaking about it.

Concepts and learning to speak

Hacker, following Wittgenstein, uses the word "concept" in speaking about these questions. It seems to me that this way of speaking is fraught with certain risks, and I shall try to point out ways in which those risks become manifest in Hacker's essay. Consider, again, the notion that concepts are the *product* of social interaction. What are we to suppose that product to consist in? If we take seriously, as I suggest we should, the notion that our concepts – our uses of words – are *constituted* by forms of social interaction, then what we get is the idea that forms of social interaction are produced by forms of social interaction. This in itself, while it may sound odd, could be a sensible claim to make, if it is taken to mean that the forms of interaction in a society tend to be the historical product of earlier forms of interaction. But this can hardly be what Hacker wants to to say. For one thing, this is no longer a remark about language. What he does want to say, however, remains obscure.

This obscurity, I would contend, is bound up with the use of the word "concept". When we think of learning to speak as the acquisition of concepts, we may get the picture that the process is mediated through the formation of certain entities ("meaning kernels" as it were) that are then applied in the use and understanding of words. Hacker, it is true, explicitly rejects the suggestion that concepts are to be thought of as entities:

> Wittgenstein treats concepts not as entities to be discovered, but as techniques of using words. To have mastered a certain concept is to have mastered the technique of the use of a certain word in some language or other. To possess a concept is to be able to use a word or phrase correctly, to explain what one means by it in a given context, and to respond with understanding to its use.[8]

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[8] Hacker, 2010, 18.

However, to speak of techniques in this connection is to retain the notion of a meaning kernel though in modified form. It has a strongly instrumental ring, and this is underscored by Hacker himself:

> Concepts … are comparable to instruments made for human purposes, and their acquisition is comparable to the mastery of the technique of using an instrument. They are rule-governed *techniques* of word use. … their techniques of application are exhibited in the use of words in practice.[9]

To regard a use of words as instrumental is to think of it as employed in the service of some purpose that exists independently of one's mastery of those words. Certainly such uses of words exist. An obvious case is the builders' game in *Philosophical Investigations* § 2. Here the technique of calling for building blocks is simply added to the activity of constructing a building; it is a limited technique within a larger whole. But it is certainly a simplification to regard this as a paradigm of the kind of learning that goes on as we learn to speak. Wittgenstein warns us against the tendency to treat various uses of words in accordance with a single pattern. Thus, after comparing the uses of words to tools in a tool-box, he writes[10]:

> Suppose someone said: "All tools serve to modify something. So, a hammer modifies the position of a nail, a saw the shape of a board, and so on." – And what is modified by a rule, a glue-pot, and nails? – "Our knowledge of a thing's length, the temperature of the glue, and the solidity of a box." — Would anything be gained by this assimilation of expressions? –

Consider, say, a child learning to ask for a drink of water. This is hardly to be understood in terms of the child's recognizing that she is thirsty, then developing a technique for setting in motion a process that will ultimately lead to her having her thirst quenched; rather in learning to ask for a drink the child develops an understanding of what it means to be thirsty. This is part of the story: there is of course an element of reciprocity in learning to understand about thirst: I do not know what it means to be thirsty unless I realize (whether I act on it or not) that someone else's expression of thirst may involve a call on me to give him something to drink. I

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[9] Hacker, 2010, 18.
[10] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 14.

believe this to show that it is not illuminating to speak of learning to express thirst or of learning to understand expressions of thirst in terms of the acquisition of a technique for achieving certain ends. A more natural way of describing what goes on is to say that the word "thirst" comes to be incorporated into the child's life, into her relations to the people around her. There is no meaning kernel that can be considered in separation from the forms of social interaction in which the word "thirst" has its use.

Similar observations can be made about the learning of many other types of expression, say, learning to express one's intentions (as well as to understand other people's expressions of intention). Here is what Hacker has to say about expressions of intention:

> Here we do not graft a piece of linguistic behaviour onto natural expressive behaviour, rather we introduce a piece of linguistic behaviour that *heralds* an action. We say 'I'm going to V (throw the ball, give you the ball)' and immediately *go on to V*. The child's initial use of 'I'm going to' is to herald an action. And from this primitive beginning, long term intentions and their expression grow, and the nexus with immediate performance weakens[11].

This is a somewhat simple story. The difference between declaring an intention as a way of heralding an action and using expressions of intention in the context of human interaction is not just a difference in time lapse. Learning to express intentions and to understand expressions of intention, to an important degree, is coming to understand the ways in which human activities may interlock or clash, to understand notions like commitment, compliance, defiance, negotiation, threat, etc.

A similar limitation of perspective gets expressed in Hacker's claim that we

> are … inducted into a human community by being trained to imitate, drilled to repeat, and later: learning and being taught *how to do things with words*, how to engage in innumerable *language-games* in the human community of family and friends, and later strangers too. The words with which we learn to do things are, of course, rule-

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[11] Hacker, 2010, 26.

governed. Their rule-governed employment is manifest in a regularity *that presupposes recognition of a uniformity*[12].

In fact, this passage expresses several different conceptions of what goes on in language learning, none of which, in my view, is able to accommodate the way in which speaking becomes an extension of the speaker's life. Neither being trained to imitate, being drilled to repeat, nor learning to recognize a uniformity makes room for the notion that learning to speak means learning to express oneself by means of words.[13] The same is probably true of what Hacker refers to by the Austinian phrase "learning to do things with words" – whether it means mastering their use as a tool for achieving various purposes along the lines described above, or learning to obey conventions for word use (later on, p. 29, Hacker speaks about *conventions determining the limits of language*).[14]

This is not to deny that elements like those listed by Hacker play a part in many of the processes involved in learning to speak. Imitation and repetition are surely important, for instance, at the early stages at which a child learns to produce the sounds of her language or begins to interact with her elders, as well as in learning to do things like greeting people, saying thanks, etc.; recognizing uniformities, on the other hand, is an important part of acquiring, say, a colour vocabulary (though it plays little role in many other kinds of language learning).[15] This said, it is important to recognize how much gets left out of all these accounts. Simply having been taught the knack of naming the colours of objects on sight is a long distance away from the mastery of colour words. Even if recognition games may be a preparation for speaking about colour, we will not say that a child knows what it is to speak of colours until remarks about colour comes to constitute an intelligible part of her life.

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[12] Hacker, 2010, 19.

[13] We should consider too that a normal speaker does not in a robotlike fashion repeat words or phrases she has heard, but utters them with intonations of pleasure, distress, effort, concentration, etc, or accompanies them with the appropriate expressions.

[14] As for the idea that our life with language is governed by rules or conventions (a frequent misunderstanding of Wittgenstein), consider Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 83. What Wittgenstein is suggesting there is that, in many situations, rather than rules determining how we act, we may pretend to follow rules, make up rules for the occasion, etc. Letting oneself be bound by rules or conventions is just one way of realting to them.

[15] At the end of the passage just quoted Hacker refers to Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, p. 348, where Wittgenstein speaks of the role of uniformity in learning to speak. But there is no suggestion that Wittgenstein intends this as a general account of what it means to learn to speak.

Connected with this is the fact that coming to relate to someone as a speaker is not a matter of noting that she lives up to some standard or conforms to some pattern, rather, it is a matter of our finding ourselves interacting with her in ways involving words.[16]

Elsewhere, Hacker hints at yet another account of language learning, when he says that concepts "are given by explanations of word meaning"[17]. Yet surely, being able to understand and apply explanations of word meaning requires a fairly high degree of linguistic sophistication. It cannot occur at an early stage of language learning.

Right after this, Hacker says that "[t]he use of words is integrated into the activities of human beings in the stream of life", but he gives no hint as to how we are to conceive of the process of integration. Is it external to the learning itself? Could a child be said to have learnt the use of certain words *before* the use was integrated into her activities, and if so, what is the role of the integration for how we think of language use: suppose there were speakers whose words were never integrated into activities; could they still be said to be using words? It is not clear how Hacker pictures the relation of the mastery of words to activities in the stream of life. For my part, I find it hard to see how that mastery could manifest itself in isolation from any activities. (Here, again, the idea of a meaning kernel seems to assert itself in Hacker's thinking.)

If Hacker's account of learning to speak, thus, seems to leave out important elements, he himself seems to be aware that there are aspects of the process that his account is unable to capture. Thus, he acknowledges that

> [w]hat children learn is not how to translate their thoughts and wishes into words, but how to request, demand, beg, nag, ask and answer questions, call people and to respond to calls, tell people things and to listen to what others tell… As the linguistic behavioural repertoire of the child grows, so too the horizon of possible thought, feeling and volition expands. The child becomes able to think things he could not

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[16] This is a central point of Segerdahl et al. 2005.
[17] Hacker, 2010, 26.

conceivably have thought, to feel things he could not possibly have felt, and to want things that no non-language using animal could intelligibly be said to want.[18]

Nevertheless, in representing the learning of concepts as the learning of a technique, in citing imitation, repetition and recognition as central to what it means to become a speaker, Hacker conveys the impression that language is a surface phenomenon, a mere set of conventions, something that could be skimmed off life like a cream. Surely, this is to misrepresent the place of language in our lives. This view of things may be an effect of regarding language learning under the aspect of concept formation, a perspective which tempts us to regard the life we live with language in too abstract terms. (It is true that we find a similar tendency in Wittgenstein's own work.)

Next, I wish to argue that the emphasis on concepts has consequences for the way Hacker thinks about the role of philosophical clarification.

On the nature of philosophical clarification

According to Hacker, philosophy "sketches the logical geography of those parts of the conceptual landscape in which we are prone to lose our way"[19]. The sketching of the landscape is not an end in itself, he adds, but is carried out in order to help us find our way. Now we may ask: what does it mean to lose our way in the conceptual landscape? This might be taken to be something that will occur in our day-to-day commerce with words. Or it might occur when we reflect on use. This contrast is important, but Hacker does not make explicit mention of it. In fact, his thinking on this score is somewhat obscure. Hacker says that philosophy, among other things, "invites us to bring to mind features of usage in order to get us to realise *the way in which we are inadvertently misusing words*"[20], which seems to suggest that he thinks of philosophical confusions as arising in the actual use of language.[21] But ordinarily

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[18] Hacker, 2010, 19.
[19] Hacker, 2010, 17.
[20] Hacker, 2010, 17. My italics.
[21] Hacker also contrasts use with what he, somewhat confusingly, calls "comparative use". He gives the example of the differences of use between "nearly" and "almost", suggesting that while few "competent English speakers could, off the cuff, spell out the differences in use between 'nearly' and 'almost'", yet they would never say, "There is not almost enough sugar in the pudding" as opposed to

philosophical confusion is taken to arise when we reflect on the use of words, not when we use them. This, anyway, is Wittgenstein's view. He quotes Augustine's remark about time as an expression of the predicament typical of someone in the grips of a philosophical confusion: *"quid est ergo tempus? si nemo ex me quaerat scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio"*.[22]

Why does Hacker ignore the all-important distinction between use and reflection? Here, of course, one can only speculate, but I would suggest that his thinking on this score is a natural consequence of the central role he gives to concepts. On the view I am attributing to him, the type of insight the philosopher needs in order to map the conceptual landscape is of a piece with the knowledge the child acquires in learning to speak. The philosopher makes explicit the child's implicit knowledge. With this goes the idea that there might be a complete account of all the concepts of our language provided through what Hacker calls explanations of word meaning. Such an account, if we had it, would forestall the arising of philosophical puzzlement in advance.

Against this, I would argue that the idea of a complete account of all our concepts is a chimaera; not because providing such an account would require an inordinate amount of time, but because the question of what the account would include is indeterminate. When we explain a word to someone, the form of our explanation will vary greatly depending on what the learner already knows or is able to do. Similarly, the type of clarification needed to resolve a philosophical puzzle will depend on the nature of our interlocutor's bewilderment. Thus, we may have to discover what false analogies lead her thinking astray. As Wittgenstein puts it in *PI* § 87:

> … One might say: an explanation serves to remove or to prevent a misunderstanding — one, that is, that would arise if not for the explanation, but not every misunderstanding that I can imagine.[23]

"There isn't nearly enough sugar in the pudding", Hacker, 2010, 18. But the inability Hacker is describing here clearly belongs to the context of reflection, not of use. Besides, it is hard to imagine the word pair "nearly" and "almost" giving rise to philosophical confusion. In all, it is hard to see what Hacker's example is supposed to illustrate.

[22] "What then is time? If nobody asks me, I know; but if I want to explain it to someone who asks me, I don't know." The quotation is in Wittgenstein, *PI* § 89. Consider also Wittgenstein's oft-quoted remarks about philosophical confusions arising when language goes on holiday (Wittgenstein, *PI* § 38), or "when language is, as it were, idling, not when it is doing work" (Wittgenstein, *PI* § 132).

[23] Wittgenstein, *PI*, § 87.

Accordingly, the type of clarification called for in philosophy is dependent on the actual confusions that arise. Where there are no confusions, there is nothing to be clarified, hence no task for the philosopher to carry out.

If this point is correct, it is connected with what might be said about language learning. The child's learning of new forms of expression is not to be thought of along the lines of the acquisition of knowledge, whether implicit or explicit. Rather, the child simply acquires new ways of acting and responding.

Conclusion

To give a substantial account of language learning is not, of course, a task for philosophy. Rather, philosophy's concern with language learning is a matter of forestalling misunderstandings of what it means to become a speaker. This requires steering clear of both the Scylla of intellectualism (treating mastery of words as constituted by *knowing how* or *knowing that*) and the Kharybdis of mechanical conditioning. Both views fail to leave room for the way in which speaking delevops organically within the life of the child. It is my sense that Hacker has not managed to avoid these risks.

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