

# Reply to Peter M.S. Hacker

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In his article for *Argumenta*, Professor Hacker essentially reiterates views he had presented, at much greater length, in his recent book *Wittgenstein: Comparisons & Context* (Oxford University Press, 2013). Here I will not discuss such views, as I already did so, albeit briefly, in a review I wrote for the *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (25.10.2014). However, as Hacker polemically discusses my review in his article, I should like to reply to some of his criticisms. I thank the editor and board of *Argumenta* for providing this opportunity.

In my review, I commented on Hacker's view that understanding a word, sentence or utterance is no mental state or process but "is more akin to an ability" (Hacker 2013: 104, 148). What I said was:

[Hacker's view] is borne out by some uses of 'understand', as in "Though she understands written English quite well, she has trouble with spoken English", but not by others ("She knows how to understand this sentence"—?). Moreover, an ability *to do what?* Abilities are individuated by their complements; e.g., sight is an ability, it is the ability to see. Once we have established so much concerning our use of the word 'sight' [...] what we are really interested in is what seeing *is*—what the exercise of the ability consists in. In the case of understanding, we seem to use the same word for both the ability ("She understands English") and its exercise: when we say "Did you understand what I said?" we are not asking whether our interlocutor possessed a certain ability but whether he exercised it.

The first sentence between parentheses, i.e. "She knows how to understand this sentence", was (obviously, I would believe) *not* intended as itself a counterexample to Hacker's thesis, as he took it to be; it was intended to show that the sentence "She understands this sentence" cannot be paraphrased into a sentence explicitly stating someone's possession of an ability (as it should, if 'understand' always indicated an ability). Indeed, as far as I can judge I fully share Hacker's opinion that "She knows how to understand this sentence" "is not very good English": that was exactly the point, and the reason for the '?'. The intended counterexample was "She understands this sentence", which, in my opinion, is not easily interpreted as being about possession of an *ability*. Hacker disagrees: "If [the sentence] means 'She understands this sentence', then it confirms the claim that understanding is ability-like, for she can say what it means." Now, perhaps in most cases if S understands *p* then S can "say what *p* means", i.e. provide an adequate paraphrase of *p*; however, few would take the two sentences ("S understands *p*", "S can say what *p* means") as synonymous or even neces-

sarily equivalent (just suppose S is aphasic). If one sees a mountain one can usually describe it: this does not entail that seeing a mountain *is* being able to describe it, or that seeing a mountain is an ability (rather than the exercise of an ability).

Later on (49: fn. 4), Hacker says: “Professor Marconi surprisingly ascribes to me the view that grammatical propositions are not merely formulations of rules for the use of words, but ‘more precisely exclusionary rules’. This is not a view I have ever advanced.” He then goes on to give examples of grammatical propositions that are not exclusionary rules. Fine. However, in his book (Hacker 2013: 166), he wrote the following: “Clearly, it is not a theory, let alone a hypothesis, that red is a colour, that red is darker than pink, or that nothing can be red and green all over—any more than it is a theory, let alone a hypothesis, that bachelors are unmarried. Nor is it a theory or hypothesis that there can be no such thing as a private language or a private ostensive definition—even though it is not immediately obvious [...]. These are exclusionary *rules*—and what they exclude is a meaningless form of words.” To be sure, Hacker does not say in so many words that *every* grammatical proposition is an exclusionary rule; but, given his list, perhaps it is not so surprising that I saddled him with such a view. I am happy to learn he does not hold it.

At some point in my review I mentioned Wittgenstein’s suggestion that behaviour is not inductive but criterial (logical) evidence for the mental. Once more, I was quoting Hacker: “In third-person cases, psychological attributes are predicated of agents on the basis of what they do and say (including their avowals of thought and experience) but this is not inductive evidence for the inner, it is *logically* good evidence or ‘criteria’” (Hacker 2013: 91). Notice that Hacker is speaking of what agents do and say *in general*, not of certain forms of behaviour as distinct from others: it is what agents do and say that, we are told, “is *logically* good evidence or ‘criteria’” of the inner. Based on this, I pointed out that “this seems to entail that we do not *conjecture* the mental from behaviour, which, in turn, could be taken to entail that we cannot go wrong.” Hacker now replies (52: fn. 11) that “it seems no such thing, and it could not be so taken”. For it is one thing to “conjecture from the fact that one’s wife is taking an aspirin, that she has a headache (she suffers from headaches and takes aspirin to alleviate them)”, and quite another to say she has a headache based on the fact that “she holds her head moaning ‘I have a terrible headache’”. True, or anyway, plausible; however, no such distinction had been originally introduced. Surely taking aspirin is part of what an agent does and says, which—we had been told—“is *logically* good evidence or ‘criteria’” of the inner.

Finally, on p. 56 Hacker quotes me as saying: “If our ‘conceptual scheme’ is to be investigated by surveying our ordinary use of words, can such use really be conceived as completely segregated from scientific uses? E.g., is our ordinary use of ‘mind’ and related words entirely isolated from scientific theories of the mind and the brain?”. His reply appears to presuppose that we can and should sharply distinguish between “those parts of our conceptual scheme that belong to the province of technical terms in science”, which should “be examined and described by scrutiny of the technical uses of words”, and those parts of our conceptual scheme that do not belong to the technical province, which “are to be examined and described by reference to the ordinary, non-technical uses of words.” This is, essentially, the distinction I intended to question: my doubt was that, nowadays, our talk of the mental may be so penetrated with loans from

psychology and the neurosciences that it has become hard to isolate “purely ordinary” uses of mind-related words. That such loans do not often come with full understanding of their original scientific “grammar” may originate all sorts of confusion, as Hacker points out, but it does not make it easier to isolate *really* ordinary uses, as Hacker appears to require.