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Clarification, Elimination and Education: Hacker and Churchland on the Dissolution of Philosophical Puzzles and the Impact of their Views on Education

Autor: Renia Gasparatou

Abstract

Objasnění, eliminace a vzdělávání: Hacker a Churchland o rozluštění filosofických záhad a dopadu jejich stanovisek na vzdělávání. – Hackerovo analytické stanovisko a Churchlandův eliminační naturalismus představují konfliktní pohledy na debatu o vědeckých a filosofických hádankách. Autorka však nabízí názor, že jejich meta-filosofické soudy a jejich řešení filosofického problému vědomí odhalují společné postoje k filosofii: oba navrhují přeformulování tradičních filosofických problémů tak, že odstraní faktory, které je způsobují. Takový postoj je pedagogicky a filosoficky problematický. Podporuje ústup od intelektuálního zápasu, a proto stojí proti všem ideálům, které by vzdělávání nebo kritické myšlení měly podporovat.

Keywords: Peter Michael Stephan Hacker, Paul Montgomery Churchland, naturalism, conceptual analysis, dissolution, education

Klíčová slova: Peter Michael Stephan Hacker, Paul Montgomery Churchland, naturalismus, pojmová analýza, rozluštění, vzdělávání

Introduction

In this paper I am going to discuss two opposite views on the relation between scientific and philosophical puzzles and suggest that a common attitude towards philosophy underlies both. I will then examine the effect such an attitude has on educational theory.

More specifically, I will consecrate on P. M. S. Hacker (1986, 1996, Bennett and Hacker 2003) and P. M. Churchland (1981, 1986, 1989, 2006). Each of them represents views and arguments that are still very vivid. Churchland's *eliminative naturalism* is very up to date in today's philosophy of mind. Hacker, on the other hand, represents a *traditional analytic* line of thought that once prevailed in analytic philosophy and still contributes to the philosophical debate, especially providing arguments against philosophical naturalism. Despite their opposing philosophical and meta-philosophical views, I will argue that both philosophers promote the dissolution of philosophical problems. The problem of consciousness is a clear example of how both Hacker and Churchland deal with the factors that generate such queries. Here I suggest that they share the same attitude concerning *all* traditional philosophical issues. I will conclude that this stance has a serious impact on education, promoting retreat from intellectual struggle.

First, I need to say a word about the distinction between *naturalism* and *traditional analytic philosophy* I have already implied. The term *naturalism* itself is very vague. Almost

ISSN 1214-8725

everybody would describe themselves as naturalists of some kind nowadays: the minimum commitment necessary is the exclusion of the *supernatural* from their philosophical system. (Stroud 1996) And since today most philosophers seem unwilling to include any supernatural entities, such as God, to reinforce their theses, all could count as naturalists. To make things worse, there are many varieties of both reductive and non-reductive naturalism and many alternative terms the philosophers would rather call themselves. There are analogous problems besetting the use of the term *traditional analytic philosophy* and most efforts to provide a univocal and comprehensive definition of it have failed.

Here I am going to use the term *naturalism* to refer to *eliminative materialists (or physicalists)* such as Churchland who claims that mental states should be identified with physical states. Accordingly, I will use the term *(traditional) analytic philosophers* to refer to the *critics* of the former type of naturalism, such as Hacker, who argue that philosophy is a *sui generis* conceptual enterprise and has nothing to do with the physical world.

In the first two sections of the paper I will try to summarise P. M. S. Hacker and P. M. Churchland's view on philosophical problems. I will use the problem of consciousness as an example. In Section 3 I will try to show that both views rely on an attempt to dissolve philosophical problems. In Section 4 I will try to highlight the implication of the dissolution manoeuvre on education. I will then offer some concluding remarks.

Peter Michael Stephan Hacker

According to traditional analytic philosophy, the aim of philosophical investigation is to clarify our understanding. This view implies a logical distinction between the *empirical world* and the *concepts* we use to talk about it. Science investigates *the empirical world;* philosophy seeks the clarification of our *understanding*. The later is a normative enterprise; it deals with the conceptual rules underlying our understanding. It aims at the dissolution of conceptual misunderstandings that create philosophical problems:

"Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words... (Wittgenstein 1997: §90) (...) When this is done the expression is completely clarified and our problem solved. (§91) (...) For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear." (§133)

Hacker picks up from Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1977: §94–99) and suggests that philosophy is to analyse the use of concepts. Philosophical problems, for example the problem concerning the nature of the mind and its relation to the brain, are *conceptual*, not empirical, problems; they have to do with the use of terms such as *understanding, thinking, knowing*, etc. (Bennett, Hacker 2003: 397) In their view, statements of neuroscience or naturalistic philosophy of mind transgress the bounds of sense. Therefore it is up to philosophy to address those problems; not up to science to resolve them. (Bennett, Hacker 2003: 382) An example of such a conceptual mistake is, according to Bennett and Hacker:

"...the neuroscientists' mistake of ascribing to the constituent *parts* of an animal attributes that logically apply only to the *whole* animal. (...) This application of

ISSN 1214-8725

psychological predicates to the brain makes no sense (...) animals, but not their brains (...) can be said to see, hear, smell, and taste things." (Bennett, Hacker 2003: 72–73)

So, it is wrong to ascribe thoughts or feelings to brain parts *because* it is wrong to say "my brain feels x" or "my eyes see blue". The correct, rule governed, ordinary linguistic usage implies which questions are legitimate. And accordingly *which answers* one should take seriously. Bennett & Hacker's comments are based on Wittgenstein's conceptual-empirical dichotomy. They suggest that grammar commits scientific hypotheses. The clarification of key concepts will help dismantle scientific misunderstandings, such as ascribing psychological predicates to body parts. I am not going to examine whether these remarks fall completely into line with Wittgenstein's overall view. I am not even going to comment on whether Bennett and Hacker are right in their linguistic observations; or whether linguistic expressions should prevent a scientist or a philosopher from working on a hypothesis. Here I just want to point out that the way they treat philosophical problems is surprisingly similar to the one implied by opposing naturalists.

Paul Montgomery Churchland

Eliminative naturalists claim that *all is natural,* that is *physical, material, scientifically explainable*. The question is what happens if something resists physical explanation. The most worrying example comes again from consciousness: mental states cannot be physically described. To use a crude example, it seems different to say: "horror movies horrify me", than say: "horror movies produce adrenalin secretion in my brain". According to Churchland, the reason why propositions of the former type cannot be translated into physical language is because ordinary language pronouncements are already mediated by *folk psychology*.

Folk psychology is, according to him, an implicit *theory;* a theory which people use in order to understand, explain and predict their own or other people's psychological events and behaviour. Following folk psychology, we attribute *desires, fears* or *beliefs*. Propositional states, such as these, are theoretical constructions and should be evaluated with reference to experience: We should lay them against the world and examine whether there is strong evidence that these entities exist. And like all theoretical entities, *desires* and *beliefs* are open to revision and total elimination if we have something better with which to replace them. This, he suggests, has happened a lot in the past with the terms of other folk theories; when, for example, folk talked about Zeus's thunderbolts.

Churchland goes on arguing that folk psychology is a *false* theory (Churchland 1989: 231). He compares it with the theory of witches, demonic possession, exorcism and trail by ordeal. *Demons* and *witches* just like *desires* and *beliefs* are theoretical entities. And just as we got rid of the theory of witches, we must now eliminate folk psychology. *Folk psychology is false because it resists physicalistic explanations.* As Churchland writes:

"If we approach *homo sapiens* from the perspective of natural history and the physical sciences, we can tell a coherent story of his constitution, development and behavioral capacities which encompasses particle physics, atomic and molecular theory, organic chemistry, evolutionary theory, biology, physiology, and materialistic neurotheory. That story, though still radically incomplete, is already extremely powerful... And it is deliberately and self consciously coherent with the rest of our developing world picture... But FP [folk

ISSN 1214-8725

psychology] is no part of this growing synthesis. Its intentional categories stand alone, without visible prospect of reduction to that larger corpus." (Churchland 1981: 75)

In order to save this *growing synthesis*, then, we should eliminate all mental terms (*desires, beliefs, fears* etc.) in favour of physical terms about brain activities. We should allow neuroscience to fill the gap (Churchland 2006). The implications of Churchland's views thus go further than his philosophy of mind. Scientific explanations about the physical world are the only kind of *explanation* he is willing to admit. Physical science is *the only* explanatory principle. Consequently, all kinds of problems people are struggling with (psychological, moral, aesthetic issues etc.) should be translated into scientific, materialistic, physical language. If this is not possible, their resistance is strong evidence that they are *pseudo-problems,* which we should abandon *by eliminating* all relevant terms from our vocabulary. Moreover social sciences should again be transformed into some short of physical science or be eliminated. Philosophy too is taken in as a branch of theoretical proto-science that articulates hypotheses for other sciences to test (Churchland 1986).

The dissolution manoeuvre

Both Hacker and Churchland address the mind-body problem. Both struggle with questions on human consciousness. They defend conflicting views about the mind. Wittgensteinians like Hacker think that mental language cannot be reduced to physical descriptions of brain processes; grammar prevents such reductions. The Bennett-Hacker line above can give us a clue concerning their treatment of the problem. Philosophical problems regarding the mind arise from grammatical misunderstandings. The most crucial confusion is the idea that concepts concerning mental phenomena are somehow linked with the workings of the brain. On the other hand, Churchland thinks that what we have been in the habit of calling mental phenomena will be elucidated by physical explanation. And since the *mental* resists such descriptions, it should be eliminated and replaced by the *physical*. Otherwise, we will never explain consciousness.

Yet, although Hacker and Churchland defend opposite theses regarding consciousness, their treatment of the problem is somehow similar. Both suggest that the problem of consciousness could be dissolved if our outlook were altered. Both argue that questions regarding consciousness seem refractory just because there is some deep misunderstanding in the way the problem is formulated. If one clears the confusion, they will dissolve the problem. According to Hacker, one should first clarify the ordinary use of all relevant concepts. According to Churchland, one should first abandon ordinary mental vocabulary (and the ontology it implies) altogether.

Both Wittgensteinians and Churchland then are trying to reform the problem in such a way that the problematic feature disappears. William Seager calls such a stand the "dissolution manoeuvre" and suggests that the "purification process" can be of two kinds: Either one can bring in science and let it perform the dissolution, just like Churchland does. Or one could restate the problem in terms of other concepts already at hand. In this way, they will dismantle the tricky qualities, hopefully without creating more troubles. This is what Wittgenstein tried to do (Seager 1999: 25–26). According to Seager, the root of the difficulty regarding consciousness is the *generation problem:* the problem of explaining exactly how

ISSN 1214-8725

the physical mechanisms on the material brain generate or underlie mental experience (Seager 1999: 1–20).

And this is just where both Hacker and Churchland aim at with their dissolving strategies. They want to dispel the generation problem: Following Wittgenstein, Hacker argues that the problem arises due to grammatical confusion and that if the confusion is resolved (that is, if we restate relevant phrases using other terms) the problem will disappear; Churchland proposes the elimination of the concepts that give rise to the issue. Again, if we restate the problem, it will be solved.

Yet, the mind-body problem is just an example of their dissolution practice. A close look to their views concerning philosophical and scientific puzzles, suggests that dissolution is their common strategy regarding philosophical quests in general. None of them would admit so. However, one can easily interpret their philosophical practice as a purification process. Churchland and Hacker want to dispose of whatever creates a philosophical problem; the former by *eliminating* terms and the latter by *analysing* them in such a way that makes them philosophically harmless. The purpose is mutual: getting rid of philosophical problems. What differentiates them is *how* they think they can do it.

Churchland and eliminative naturalists claim to take the problem of consciousness, for example, seriously and thus to address it in scientific terms. Their final proposal, though, is to cut out whatever seems to make the problem hard to handle, namely, mental vocabulary. After all, philosophy is continuous with the sciences. It formulates proto-theories or proto-sciences by posing questions. Or it unifies scientific theories. If some philosophical hypothesis doesn't seem to be translatable in the scientific physical language, it should be eliminated. Apparently philosophy is considered a genuine enterprise *as long as* it is continuous with the sciences. If a philosophical assumption is not scientifically exploitable, it is bogus. If an explanation is not a scientific physical explanation, it does not explain anything.

Hacker relies on Wittgenstein. And the latter believes that philosophy cannot formulate any theories, theses or even arguments. Philosophy is a purely conceptual investigation and cannot take a stand on empirical matters (Wittgenstein 1997: §38, 90, 91, 123 and *passim*). Its sole aim is therapeutic. (§133) Hacker, though, in his most recent works does not explicitly suggest the *dissolution* of philosophical problems. Yet he repeatedly suggests that "problems of the nature of the mind and its relation to the brain" (Bennett and Hacker 2003: 397) are conceptual (that is, philosophical), not empirical (or scientific), problems. If a philosopher tries to step out of the conceptual domain, they do not perform a legitimate quest any more. *Explanation, thesis, hypothesis, theory* then all refer to *scientific* prospects. Again, an explanation that is not scientific or physical does not explain anything at all. Of course it is supposed to do this within the space of reasons and just how large this space is depends on the philosopher performing grammatical investigation. Yet, in theory philosophy is deprived of any epistemic contribution on empirical matters. The province of philosophy:

"Is not the domain of empirical truth or falsehood, but the domain of sense and nonsense. It investigates and describes the bounds of sense: that is, the limits of what can coherently be thought and said. Its destructive task is the criticism of transgressions of the bounds of sense." (Bennett and Hacker 2003: 399)

ISSN 1214-8725

So they too use the dichotomy between science and philosophy to argue that various statements in neuroscience or naturalistic philosophy of mind transgress the bounds of sense. And, just like in Wittgenstein, the domain of empirical truth or falsehood is not philosophy's business. Philosophy's field of inquiry is sense and nonsense. This implies that philosophy is to determine what is nonsense. In their view, naturalistic efforts to identify the mind with the brain are nonsensical. But then one has to clear misunderstandings away, to dissolve the nonsense. Such a practice completely falls in line with what Seager has identified as the second type of purification process. Clarification consists in restating the problem in other terms, which will hopefully dismantle the tricky qualities.

Hacker treats most philosophical problems as conceptual confusions that need clarification. Traditional philosophical questions regarding consciousness, perception, and knowledge are never presented as genuine problems. At the root of each problem lies some misunderstanding, which the conceptual analyst should clear away. Philosophical worries are dissolvable by clarification techniques (Hacker 1986).

Such a picture again brings Hacker's view surprisingly close to Churchland's: At the end of the day both viewpoints agree that science alone can illuminate the world around us. Thus, scientific puzzles are the only ones worth pursuing in a genuine matter. Philosophical worries, on the contrary, should be treated by dissolution manoeuvres. In the next section I will discuss the impact of the dissolution manoeuvre on education.

The impact of the dissolution manoeuvre in education

Evidently there is a consensus regarding the privileged role of science to explain the empirical world. According to Churchland, the methods of science are the only explanatory techniques we have. And since science only applies to the physical world, he claims that whatever resists a physical description should be abolished from our ontology all together. Hacker too implies that science alone can elucidate the empirical world, since philosophy should restrict itself to conceptual investigation. Furthermore, conceptual analysis dissolves, rather than resolves, philosophical problems.

Hacker and Churchland represent very strong opposing positions regarding the relation of science to philosophy. The former considers philosophy as different in kind from science. The latter regards them as continuous. Yet, both agree that the physical world can only be illuminated by science. Moreover, both treat all philosophical problems as pseudo-problems that have arisen due to misunderstandings. Underlying those views, there is a problem that both sides share, and which has to do with their overall attitude concerning philosophical puzzles. The trouble lies in the rational they promote concerning intellectual puzzles and the impact it would have, if taken seriously, on educational practice.

Education in general is supposed to encourage people's critical thinking. Scientific education in particular aims at teaching us rational reasoning processes. It offers intellectual tools that might help us think more clearly and question theses or theories that seem ungrounded. Social sciences and humanities, including philosophy, can be taken to have the same motivation.

ISSN 1214-8725

For the most part, philosophical worries mostly depend on general and abstract questions that both Churchland and Hacker treat as bogus. Their reasons for doing so differ and their dissolution practice varies too. But they both seem to promote some sort of retreat: Worries that present science cannot (sensibly) address should be eliminated or dissolved. At the end of the day, Hacker's pursuit of conceptual *therapy* and Churchland's plea for the *elimination* of folk psychology eventually boil down to *quietism.*

Instead of pursuing solutions, then, they invite us to seek dissolution techniques. Instead of confronting the problem we are asked to restate it in terms that make it harmless. Their attitude towards philosophical problems goes far beyond philosophy. For Hacker, *any general question* is a pseudo-question that should be treated. For Churchland *whatever cannot be physicalised* is bogus and should be eliminated. They promote quietism against worrying.

Their dissolution strategy is the root of the difficulties they face when the topic of scientific education and evolution comes up. For in order to defend their versions of the dissolution manoeuvre they commit themselves to very strong positions regarding scientific puzzles: Churchland espouses radical scientism. For his dissolution manoeuvre to work, he has to convey any hard theoretical problem to some ideal science and let it handle it. Hacker restricts science within the realm of our current worldview. For his dissolution manoeuvre to work, any hard theoretical problem has to be analysed solely by invoking ordinary language dispositions. Both stances are extreme, inflexible and cannot depict a realistic image of education and conceptual evolution.

More importantly though, their common attitude can hardly prescribe an ideal that education should promote. We expect education to foster curiosity and trust in our intellectual powers. Intellectual puzzles are supposed to be welcome. Their peculiar forms of quietism stand against all the values education should endorse. The dissolution manoeuvre supports the "easy way out". Resisting any change by reshuffling the uses of terms is Hacker's version; forcing change by eliminating expressions is the Churchland way. Opposite ends meet in undermining genuine intellectual struggle.

Conclusion

Churchland and Hacker are leading figures of the radical naturalistic-versus-analytic debate. In this paper I tried to sketch what I believe is the impact of those views on education. Both theories are quite widespread and although most philosophers subscribing to them do not get into substantive educational issues, their suggestions entail certain ideas concerning the nature and the practice of education.

I think it is important to realise the impact those ideas may have on education. Both views rely on the idea that most traditional philosophical problems are pseudo-quests that will vanish if restated. None of the philosophers above has actually managed to get rid of the mind-body problem, which mostly concerns them. In fact, none of the philosophers claiming that dissolution or elimination is the answer to philosophy has ever managed to dissolve any philosophical problem. That could be because dissolution techniques echo the philosophical theses those philosophers inescapably endorse (Sorensen 1993).

ISSN 1214-8725

What is even more essential to notice, though, is that such a stand is problematic when taken as a general attitude towards intellectual puzzles. It suggests that if a problem is not easily solvable, or rather if it has not been solved so far, it is hollow. Such an idea is pedagogically and philosophically infertile for it stands against all ideals education or critical thinking should promote.

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(*Dr. Renia Gasparatou* is a lecturer of Philosophy at the University of Patras, Greece. She received her BS in Philosophy from the University of Athens, Greece (1992–1996) and her PhD in contemporary Epistemology from the University of Crete, Greece (1999–2005). Part of her PhD research was undertaken in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science of the University of Pittsburgh, USA, where she was a visiting scholar (2002–2003). Since 2005, she teaches Epistemology in the Department of Philosophy and in the Department of Educational Science, University of Patras. Her research interests include epistemology, theories of knowledge, philosophy of language and philosophy of education.)