Review of J.F.M. Hunter, *Wittgenstein on Words as Instruments: lessons in philosophical psychology*. Edinburgh University Press, 1990 ISBN 0 7486 0163 5   30.00 (pbk January, 1992 ISBN 0 7486 0194 5 12.95 170 pp.)

Michael O'Donovan Anderson, *The Philosopher*, April 1993

Professor Hunter has some good news, and some bad news. The good news, at least for students of philosophy, is that philosophical investigation can be as easy as knowing how to mean what you say and say what you mean. The bad news is that knowing *what* you mean when you say it is much harder than most of us think. The problem is that the study of language has been historically misdirected; we've been investigating what it is that words do when all along, to paraphrase a famous title, it is we who do things with words. More specifically, we have been operating under the general illusion that the most basic purpose of language is to provide an existential status report of the world, both physical and psychological. Thus, recalling Russell, "The chair is green" becomes the dual statement "There is a chair, and it is green" and, given the philosophers' drive for systematic simplification, "I believe the chair is green" inevitably becomes "There is a belief, and its form, contents or object is..." Ridding us of the illusions which lead, disastrously, to this type of analysis and its accompanying ontological consequences, is Hunter's main goal, and one carried out admirably well in his latest book.

The overall strategy is relatively simple -- take your favorite philosophically puzzling word and investigate, carefully and systematically, how and why we use it, thus discovering not the state it reports or the object it conceals, but how it works, and what, in saying, we are thereby doing. In this way Hunter builds up a sizable lexicon -- it occupies fully two-thirds of his book -- the existence of which not only debunks the ontological implications of our everyday psychological vocabulary (i.e. the idea that beliefs, intentions, and bits of knowledge are definable things which promise, given the right methods, to become available to us as objects of philosophical investigation) but also, by working out in detail the implications of that anti-ontological stance for specific words, makes a significant contribution to an important and ongoing debate in the philosophy of language.

Take, for example, one common word, the misunderstanding of which has undoubtedly had serious consequences not just for the would-be amorous philosopher, but for anyone tempted by Cupid to utter it: Love. Conventional wisdom would have you believe that "love" names some definable state in which you would be if, for instance, you were to be uncharacteristically effervescent, or feel drunk for no alcoholic reason, every time some particular other were to show up. It is often even held to be that state upon the existence of which life-long marital commitments are to be based. (Although one cannot help but speculate that it is dissolution of precisely these commitments which, occurring shortly after the heretofore giddy couple wakes up in a decidedly un-giddy mood and determines that they are now 'out' of love, apparently having used it all up, have led to the extreme rate of divorce in our culture.)

All this trouble could be avoided, and without even returning to the draconian legal and economic disincentives which prevented divorce in an earlier time, if we would simply realize the basic mistake we are making in treating "love" as the name for some mental or emotional state. Hunter argues, via an examination of the ways and times in which "I (am in) love (with) you" is said, and, even more significantly, when, despite feelings of various sorts, it is *not* said, that, rather than a report, the

statement is itself a significant *act* -- a commitment to a particular kind of lasting comportment towards, or relationship with, another person. It is a commitment to a particular type of behavior (caring, nurturing, generous) and attitude (treating the other's concerns as your own) which you will exercise towards another person; if love *is* anything, it is the name for this pattern of behavior and attitude which we describe as loving. Saying "I love you" is a way of entering into such a relationship, (or offering the possibility of one), constituted by loving activity, and, one hopes, heightened and accompanied by feelings of joy and excitement - but not rooted in them (for, of course, such words as happiness and joy do not name states, either, but rather express a propensity towards, or a willingness to participate in, certain types of behavior. It should be noted, however, that this is not to imply that feelings do not exist - it is only to deny that our psychological words refer to them.)

Hunter follows similar lines of argument with such words as "believe", "know", "think", "pain", and "hope", in each case showing that the words do not function as referents, but rather have a specifically performative aspect -- to use them is to do something like commit, warn, inform, and the like. There is even a section on "concealed metaphors" in which he treats such commonly puzzling nouns as "mind" ,"will", and "soul" as useful metaphors for collectively referring to groups of activities (like "mental" or "ethical" activities), by creating the image of a kind of sub-agent - a mind or a soul - as the locus of those activities.

Of course, none of this to say that Hunter's arguments are universally convincing; one cannot help but feel the strain involved in forcing some words into the performative mold. But it is tempting to write off such strain as merely the result of persistent and deeply rooted linguistic dogma, and Hunter has certainly given a highly intelligent, thorough defense of his position, even if an indirect, lexical one.

What remains puzzling about the book is its relation to the work of Wittgenstein. It is not that Wittgenstein's position is not made clear; the book is peppered with quotes which, if they do not actually show that Wittgenstein agreed with Hunter, at least show that he did not clearly disagree. What is curious is, in a book that is clearly not *about* Wittgenstein, why the fact that he may have agreed with the position presented there is supposed to be important. Clearly, for marketing purposes, saying (or showing) that Wittgenstein agreed with you is the next best thing to having him write sympathetic jacket notes (a possibility complicated by Wittgenstein's not-so-recent death), but philosophically, although the book certainly stands in that sector of philosophical analysis occupied prominently by such thinkers as Wittgenstein and Austin, it nevertheless stands there quite well on its own. Indeed, between sympathetic and critical readings of its arguments and positions, it would be quite possible to treat a wide range of contemporary issues in epistemology and philosophy of language, making this a useful volume for beginning (although serious) courses in those areas of philosophy. As such, the book *could* serve as an adequate guide to certain limited aspects of Wittgenstein's thought, but that would be, to some degree at least, to misuse a tool designed for more general purposes.

Nevertheless, Hunter's most recent production is an intelligent, stimulating, and, most importantly, accessible introduction to a central contemporary debate -- and one which, unlike many introductions, makes a significant contribution of its own. I highly recommend it as a companion to one's own philosophical ruminations on the complexities of language; it will surely make such ruminations more productive.