

**Michael Hymers**

*Wittgenstein and the Practice of Philosophy.*

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In the past half a century Wittgenstein (W) has become a philosophical and cultural icon and, perhaps because of this, there is a disconcerting ease with which his name is dropped and his ‘views’ are intoned or taken for granted. Even in ‘analytical philosophy’ there is a prevailing view that we have absorbed the lessons and skills he taught us and now we can move on. Such misguided attitudes are called into question by a new blossoming of W scholarship which shows how interesting, relevant and demanding his works really are. The most recent of such first-rate books, Hymers’ monograph is a comprehensive introduction and guide to W’s philosophy.

What distinguishes Hymers’ book from already available first-rate guides are differences of focus, approach, and treatment of particular issues. If you want to do a close and careful reading of the first 133 paragraphs of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Andrew Lugg is your man. If you want to reflect, in the light of insightful observations about the arguments, voices and style of writing of the *Investigations*, David Stern is your guide. If you want a reliable survey of W’s early and later philosophy, you can hardly do better than consulting Joachim Schulte. Hymers’ book is a more comprehensive guide than the first two, since it covers both the early and later philosophy, and it differs from all three in having as its primary focus W’s conception of the nature, methods, and practice of philosophy. Hymers takes W at his word: philosophy aims at dissolving problems generated by a misunderstanding of our concepts.

The book starts off with a chapter instructively sketching conceptions of metaphilosophy proposed by Russell, the logical positivists, Oxford style ordinary language philosophers, and Quine. The last chapter returns to this theme and elaborates W’s conception of philosophy as clarification, as well as raising and answering charges of quietism, pessimism, and conservatism that have been leveled at W. Sandwiched between these two chapters are insightful and in-depth discussions of the major W-ian themes and variations on language and essence, meaning and understanding, naming and reference, private language, rule-following, the status of first person psychological utterances, the ‘problem of other minds’ and privileged access.

The continuities and discontinuities that Hymers points to between the early and later W, together with the transitional phase of self-criticism, strike just the right note, so that we can see a striking unity to W’s thought and life and can decline the stark choice between the New and the Old W-ians. The issue of the relation between philosophy and science—widely seen as pro-science in the early period and anti-science in the later—is

confronted and diffused, as is the puzzle of the later W's 'silence' on ethics. There is the added bonus of a clear sketch and evaluation of W's *On Certainty*, where Hymers takes up W's discussion of Moore's 'refutation' of skepticism about the external world. Moore's famous assertion that 'I know that here is a hand' is shown to be a peculiar sort of instructive nonsense. Hymers connects these issues with W's metaphilosophy—the aim of which is to melt the tensions and remove 'the problems that trouble us' through clarification, through fresh metaphors, through putting things side by side, so that such tensions no longer arise for us. W is thus seen as holding no positions or theories, and hence there is no argument, e.g., for or against philosophical skepticism or realism. This way we are not provoked to defend or attack contrary positions, but are able to see what's right in front of our eyes.

Hymers also engages with contemporary W scholars and other influential philosophers. In the process he draws us into *doing* philosophy and situates W in relation to the philosophical tradition in general and to 20<sup>th</sup> century analytical philosophy in particular: Quine on metaphilosophy; Kripke on names, following a rule, the possibility of a private language of sensations; Cavell and Stern on the various voices in *PI* and the role of conversation in philosophy; the issue of the unity of W's thought (Diamond, Conant), and so on. Hymers' engagement with Kripke's work is exemplary in that it is both illuminating commentary on W *and* work on a philosophical problem. It is refreshing to see these bountiful connections with the work of contemporary W scholars for it enables us to see the full significance of W and the rich development and implications of his thought.

Since a constant feature of W's philosophy is a concern with the nature of philosophy itself, Hymers is right to make it explicit how W's treatment of philosophical problems dovetails and manifests his metaphilosophy. If we neglect the metaphilosophy, we get an amputated W, while with Hymers we get a restoration of bodily integrity to W's legacy. The view that philosophical problems are to be dissolved rather than solved through a clear overview of our concepts is given just the right sort of treatment by Hymers: 'a philosophical problem' cannot be captured in some definitional formula. Rather, the notion of a philosophical problem is a family resemblance concept and there are similarities as well as differences in such a family. This is a very W-ian way of responding to the demand for a definition in terms of some shared uniform essence.

W's conception of philosophy is not that of the 'overseer' of the sciences, or that of 'under-labourer' for them, nor is it the conception that philosophy is continuous with the sciences. For him, philosophy is a kind of logic that involves the activity of describing and providing a perspicuous overview of the norms of our language games. On the early approach, 'the problems' were to be dissolved through translating the often ambiguous and vague everyday language into the clear and precise language of formal logic. On the new approach, 'You must look at the practice of language and then you will see.' (p. 196)

Now a few remarks. Hymers begins and ends the book with a consideration of W's 'metaphilosophy' and throughout he sees W's discussion of philosophical questions as reminding us how these enact his metaphilosophy. But did W have a metaphilosophy? Recall that in the *PI* he remarks that what passes for philosophy of philosophy is just philosophy. There is, similarly, no orthography of orthography—but just orthography. The very idea of a metaphilosophy may then rest on a mistake. This question deserves more attention than is given in the book. On a related matter, occasionally patches of colour—vignettes from W's life—light up Hymers's philosophical text. What role, if any, does the biographical dimension—the context and the philosopher's existential situation—play in W's metaphilosophy?

W has been read as wanting to put an end to philosophy, but philosophy after W should really be more important in our culture than ever. Refurbished through its self-critique it can now proceed with its diverse methods to address and resolve the conceptual tensions that confront us in various areas of our everyday life.

Finally, Hymers raises the question: why did the later W not do ethics? If the cage of the Tractarian theory of meaning is later rejected and replaced by a language game approach, why the silence about ethics? Hymers' answer is that, although W could now do ethics, his existential predicament lags behind his philosophy. But be that as it may. I wonder: what to make of the many cryptic remarks about moral concepts and ethical instruction scattered in his various notebooks? Surely his observations—on love and faith, courage and friendship, humility, honesty and self-deception, on how to treat decently someone whom one does not like or who does not like one, on how and how not to bring up children, on how and how not to do philosophy, or how to be or not to be religious—are instructive ethical aphorisms.

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