# In Search of Nonsense

A rotation of our examination of
'nonsense' in the later Wittgenstein
around the fixed point of
our real need

BY

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for my parents, and maxi

The question is, [...] which is to be master – that's all.

— Humpty-Dumpty
on how the meaning of a word is determined,
*Alice through the Looking Glass*

While the Library contains [...] all the variations allowed by the twenty-five orthographic symbols, it includes not a single absolute piece of nonsense.

— Borges, *Library of Babel*

# Contents

## Abbreviations of Wittgenstein's key (later) works

**MS** Manuscript (Wittgenstein's Nachlass as classified into numbered manuscripts by Von Wright).

**OC** On Certainty.

**PI** Philosophical Investigations.

**PO** Philosophical Occasions.

**PPF** Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment.

**RC** Remarks on Colour.

# 1 Motivation and groundwork

## 1.1 Significance

On the thirteenth of October 1930, Wittgenstein told his followers gathered in an ordinary lecture room in Cambridge's *University Arts School*[1] that 'a [philosophical] method has been found; as when chemistry developed out of alchemy'[2]. Alongside the work of J.L. Austin, what later became Wittgenstein's methods (plural)[3] sprouted a school known as *Ordinary Language Philosophy*, at one time so dominant this side of the channel that it became a primary target of scathing polemic lobbed across the water, as 'academic sadomasochism',[4] amongst other things. Wittgenstein described his methods as 'therapies'[5] to allow people to 'pass from unobvious nonsense to obvious nonsense'[6]. Discovery of this nonsense and how it affects our thinking[7] were to be the only 'results of philosophy'. Other than that, philosophy ought to 'leave everything as it is'. A successful search for what Wittgenstein means *exactly* when he says 'nonsense' would find out nothing less than what it is that philosophy discovers. As many before me have attempted[8], this is the nut I wish to crack.

The novelty of my work here on 'nonsense' is in the rigorous application of Wittgensteinian conceptions of word meaning to my investigations. By seeing questions about word meaning as about the particular place of a word within a given practice, we discover how difficult it is to locate a solid understanding of 'nonsense' in Wittgenstein's later work. Only when we make our questions practical, concerning how the word 'nonsense' fits into Wittgenstein's method (why some things come to deserve such harsh words of dismissal) can we find a satisfactory end to our search.

## 1.2 The positions on this matter in the literature

We must start our survey of the literature not from the place of so-called orthodox readers of the Investigations, who dominated in the immediate decades after Wittgenstein's death, but rather from the position of those known alternatively as New Wittgensteinian, resolute or austere readers, who hold more sway today. For, it is those who saw themselves as coming after whose business it was to define themselves in relation to those who came first, and those who came first to react to the characterisation provided.[9]

1. Wittgenstein and Moore, *Lectures, Cambridge 1930-1933*, xv.
2. Wittgenstein and Moore, 67.
3. PI§133brf.
4. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 141.
5. PI§133brf.
6. PI§464.
7. PI§119. 'How it affects our thinking' is intended as a rough and ready interpretation of the 'bumps' in this remark.
8. It's worth noting that this emphasis on nonsense has its critics. See Hacker, 'Wittgenstein, Carnap and the New American Wittgensteinians', 2.
9. Especially in the last couple of decades there has been great overlap between work on Wittgenstein's earlier and later philosophies. This interconnection is not present in the

To represent the resolute readers I will pick the Oxford professor Stephen Mulhall's book *Wittgenstein's Private Language*. Mulhall sets up the distinction in terms of the 'substantial' reading and the 'resolute' reading. The substantial reading is constituted by the claim that nonsense is created when words are combined in ways contrary to their meaning (their grammar), whereas resolute readers claim that nonsense is a concatenation of words (or perhaps what look like words) which individually lack meaning.[10] Where we stand on this distinction determines our reading of key sections of Wittgenstein's work. For example, the private language argument can either show, per substantial readers, that given the meanings of the words 'private' and 'language', the combination 'private language' is illicit (for something to constitute a language it must be public, ergo not private). Or it could show, per resolute readers, that the phrase 'private language' is gibberish, and this can be proved as such by the fact that someone who uses it is unable to explain what they mean.

Seminal descriptions of the distinction were just arguments against the substantial perspective; the substantial reader was defined by what they got wrong.[11] Mulhall inherits this distinction but treats it as unproblematic. He says 'I am not much interested in claiming that any particular mainstream readings of the *Philosophical Investigations* would count as substantial rather than resolute [...] although I take it to be obvious that some would', despite recognising the critical angle of the distinction when he says 'proponents of the resolute reading have identified a possible misreading'[12]. That Mulhall concisely sets things up for his close readings is to his credit, but one cannot help but note that the living spectre of 'orthodox readings', PMS Hacker, understandably objects to a description of his ideas written by those who claim he was wrong, produced in order to show he was wrong. The error baked into standard descriptions of the substantial reading is the implication that words in a nonsense utterance have meaning. It is a standard position to claim that the meaning of the words in an utterance is determined by the meaning of the utterance, and if the utterance is meaningless, then the words must be too. Hacker objects that he only needs to claim that the words in a nonsense utterance have meaning insofar as you can look them up in the dictionary and find an entry there for them; nothing more. Indeed, as he notes, nonsense is created when (what looks like) an ordinary senseful word is not used in line with its rules for usage.[13] So, whether an utterance is nonsense depends on the meaning of its words. The same objections

literature in one important respect. Despite the use of both »Sinlos«(senseless) and »Unsinn«(nonsense) in the *Investigations*, the possibility of a distinction of meanings between the two is *not* an important theme in the literature of his later works *unlike* that on the earlier. They are both generally translated as 'nonsense'. I will also adopt this presumption without argumentation, following the line of the literature.

10. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 1–2.

11. Witherspoon, 'Conceptions of nonsense in Carnap and Wittgenstein', Chap. 13 in *The New Wittgenstein*, essay makes distinction between what Wittgenstein claimed and what Carnap claimed and claims substantial readers are borrowing Carnap's view.

12. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 8, His issues seems to be that he does not want to load down his work by responding to anyone in particular, but for his points to be relevant his must be reconciling (as he goes on to) genuine perspectives that people do have.

13. Hacker, 'Wittgenstein, Carnap and the New American Wittgensteinians'.

are raised from more neutral perspectives too.[14]

I think this distinction can be restated such that it does not beg the question as follows. The substantial reader is someone who thinks that nonsense is created when the rules of the language are broken, while the resolute reader is someone who thinks that nonsense is created when someone makes a statement that cannot be started with. The resolute reader sees that not only is the other person not using language like we normally do, but crucially they do not do so creatively, nor in a way that allows us, through careful conversation, to reconstruct what they meant in terms we can understand. The resolute reader will say 'it looks like he is using our words like us, but the way he acts with them makes it clear that he is not', and the substantial reader will say 'he is using our words, and misemploying them, and so not making any sense'.[15]

We can see evidence for this form of the distinction when we look at Hacker and Mulhall's differing commitments. Hacker tells us 'Wittgenstein thought that [...] grammar consists of general rules that lay down which combination of words are licensed and which excluded. In so doing, they determine the bounds of sense'[16]; that is, the substantial reader claims a statement is nonsense iff it breaks certain grammatical rules of a certain language game, rules that we can be reminded of to allow us to realise that what has been said is nonsense. In contrast, Mulhall tells us the resolute reader sees Wittgenstein's work 'not as intended to construct a particular philosophical account of the conditions of sense [...] it is, rather, intended simply to deploy [our..] everyday understanding [of language] in a philosophical context'[17].

# 2 Wittgensteinian 'word meaning' and nonsense

## 2.1 Wittgenstein does not coin a term of art

A strong interpretative work on Wittgenstein must draw its method from Wittgenstein's own in two key ways. First, unless we wish to read Wittgenstein as self contradicting, any claims about what Wittgenstein means must be compatible with what we take him to believe about meaning. Second, it must not fall into the methodological pitfalls Wittgenstein identifies. And if we look into how Mulhall and various other writers talk about 'nonsense', we find it most unwittgensteinian.

14. Schönbaumsfeld, 'A 'resolute' later Wittgenstein?', 652–3.

15. This version of the distinction works well for our purposes, but would require more work if it were to be a complete theory. Particularly, while it might be accurate for philosophical nonsense, it seems like if someone who produces nonsense from struggling to talk (see the discussion on the following page) is not strictly rule breaking.

16. Hacker, 'Wittgenstein, Carnap and the New American Wittgensteinians', 13.

17. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 6-7 NB: This is said about the tractatus rather than the Investigations, but Mulhall advocates for transferring of conceptions of 'nonsense' from one to the other.
I feel a great deal more could be said about exactly how distinct Mulhall and Hacker's approaches are, considering the word limit this (perhaps) provisional distinction must do.

Avner Baz makes an observation vital to understand good Wittgensteinian methodology.[18] He argues that, in order to fulfil the Wittgensteinian goal of bringing word $x$ back to its everyday use, it is not enough to investigate the ordinary truth conditions of utterances of sentences that include $x$. One has to describe how we talk. In our case, someone trying to apply Wittgenstein's method to learn about the word 'nonsense' might mistakenly go about observing some everyday utterances, to ask if they are, in an everyday way, nonsense. But this is already a step away from ordinary language, as in ordinary language questions are not asked in this detached way. We always ask questions for some specific purpose, and if we isolate a question from a particular motivation for asking it, then it is as stranded as had we removed it from other sources of context.[19] Let us take a situation where someone, called John, has been hit in the mouth so that he cannot speak clearly any more because of blood and broken teeth. Nonetheless, he tries to communicate something specific to us. John makes a series of noises, 'eiiegh fhvuo ytgerb', and I ask of someone else, 'was that just nonsense?'. In this context, I could have various different motivations for this question. To give just two: I could be wondering if he is even trying to make an English sentence or just making noises of pain so I could determine if he is suffering from brain damage, or I could be wondering if someone else understood him and could report to me what he said, so I could determine whether anyone heard information about a potential attacker.[20] If I take your question to be the first one, I could correctly answer 'no, he is not speaking nonsense, these are English sentences, just too mushed up by his injury to be comprehensible'. If I take it to be the second one, I could correctly answer 'yes, he is trying to make English words, but all that comes out is nonsense, due to his injury'. The further question, whether his statement was, in an absolute sense, nonsense, does not fit in here.[21]

Both Mulhall and Hacker seem to be putting forward contextualist ideas of the word 'nonsense', which would make them vulnerable to the above criticism. That is, they believe that any given statement can be determined to be nonsense by the application of a set of rules to the details of the case. This is not stated explicitly, so I would be interested to hear criticism, but what Mulhall calls an ability to distinguish sense from nonsense suggests an ability to distinguish between kinds, regardless of the motivation behind the request to distinguish. Likewise, Hacker talks about the application of rules of grammar determining if

18. Baz, *When Words Are Called For*, 119 and elsewhere.

19. There may be some words that are less sensitive to this kind of context. One can (in most cases) answer the question 'is $x$ a cat' without considering the purpose of the taxonomy. Though, biologist presumably must.

20. Note that both of these interpretations of this series of noises are of someone trying to say something within a language, as 'it is only in a language that I can mean something by something'(PI§35 box). It is only when someone is actually or trying to communicate something with language that they can actually mean something by something. See section 7 of this essay for a related discussion.

21. We can find something similar in Cavell: 'These antitheses [between voluntary and involuntary] miss exactly those actions about which the question "Voluntary or not" really has no sense.' See Cavell, *Must we Mean What we Say?*, 7, where in turn Austin's paper *A Plea for Excuses* is cited.

an utterance is 'nonsense', which seems to suggest criteria for 'nonsense' separate from the motivations at play.

Mulhall tells us that the everyday person has an ability to distinguish between sense and nonsense.[22] This claim is central to the success of his account – if Wittgenstein is leaving everything as it is[23], and rejecting the need for a new, philosophical language[24], we should expect him to employ ordinary concepts. Mulhall is on good ground here, because this is an ability we must have, given we sometimes call a remark 'nonsense' and are correct about it. But he needs to show not just that this ability exists, but that it functions like he needs it to. The most straightforward idea of what this ability amounts to would be the ability to use the word 'nonsense'. But if we make a survey of our actual usage of 'nonsense', and therefore what an exercise of the ability to use the word 'nonsense' looks like, it is not what Mulhall wants it to be:[25]

> Lucy: We were lovers, Grandmother.
>
> Lucinda: Yes, you were. I know that, Dear. And then you weren't and then he found somebody else. And he married her and she died. And he's a widower.
>
> Lucy: Partly because of me.
>
> Lucinda: No. That's nonsense. Jennifer died because she ignored doctor's orders.
>
> American Sitcom 'as the world turns' aired 2006-08-24

> The legacy of Labour is hyperactive law making that has spread confusion among police officers, judges and every other professional who has to deal with this cascade of nonsense
>
> BBC news 2010-01-22

> The only reason given [for the bill] is that the Socialists have long advocated it: They have advocated a lot of nonsense in their time
>
> Captain Crookshank, Hansard vol 417 cc1361, 1945-12-19

If we look at these examples, which I have picked out to be as representative as possible of oral and written language use of different registers, one thing sticks out. Every single one of the statements or ideas described as 'nonsense' have a definitive sense. If I say 'her death was my fault', and taking a coherent shared idea of moral responsibility, then my statement has a sense and is either true or false. Similarly, unnecessary laws or foolish political ideas are foolish because of

22. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 6–7.
23. PI§124.
24. PI§120.
25. My focus on & survey of the ordinary usage of 'nonsense' bears great similarity to (Ulatowski, 'Resolute readings of Wittgenstein and nonsense', 7–11), though at least my survey was instead inspired by Cavell's of the word 'criteria' in Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, 3–37. My survey differs from Ulatowski's in important ways, including the conclusion and the types of examples chosen.

the particular sense they have; one offence mentioned in the BBC news article, 'distributing a pack of eggs when told not to do so by an authorised officer', is nonsense because of the humorousness of the coherent image of someone getting arrested for an egg-based offence. In fact, what seems to connect all these examples is that the word 'nonsense' is used primarily as a particularly harsh way of calling something untrue, or perhaps just telling someone to shut up.[26] From these examples we could learn: if something is nonsense, it is in its sense that it is nonsense.

But this should not concern us. First, because nonsense utterances of the variety that Wittgenstein is interested in, like the statement 'I know I am in pain', must retain at least a very minimal meaning given they can be translated into utterances with the same meaning in different languages. Second, and even more importantly, when Wittgenstein tells us 'when it is said that a sentence is senseless, it is not as if its sense were somehow senseless. Rather, a combination of words is excluded from language, withdrawn from circulation'[27] he is not giving us some conditions for sense. The purpose of this remark is instead to point us towards the force of the claim that something is nonsense; what it does rather than what it picks out. Calling something nonsense (in philosophy or in the everyday) is a request (command?) that the other person stops saying it, that people see how valueless it is and take it out of circulation, stop trading it back and forth.

## 2.2 We feel a bit confused about 'use in language' for a few paragraphs

At this point, it seems that the word 'nonsense' no longer has any purpose for us. If we find it to be nothing more than a particularly harsh everyday rejection of a statement, then it seems we have not learnt anything new about Wittgenstein's method.

One of the more famous slogans from the *Philosophical Investigations* is from PI§43, 'the meaning of a word is its use in language'[28]. As a slogan, its surroundings are rarely quoted, likely as that would make it unwieldy to chant

26. A possible counter-argument here would be to claim that these usages are parasitic upon the less common usage of nonsense meaning 'gibberish', this is the sense Wittgenstein meant, so this survey is irrelevant. But the nonsense of the *Philosophical Investigations* is not gibberish, given it is not just random sounds. So, again, we cannot draw on ordinary usage. Here, I argue for a unified single meaning of 'nonsense', but we should expect some uses to be closer and some further away from this. For example, it might be the case that, in ordinary language, untruths produced by conceptual misunderstandings (like perhaps a misunderstanding of 'guilt') are more likely to be called nonsense.

27. PI§500.

28. In this essay, I translate »Gebrauch in der Sprache« as 'use in language' rather than the typical 'use in the language'. I believe it would be more standard to translate as I do, due to the tendency of English to drop definite articles from abstract nouns where it is present in the German (Durrell, *Hammer's German Grammar and Usage*, 79). Regardless, though, of the possibility that the translators had good reason for this choice, I in this way emphasise that the meaning of a word need not be in every case defined on the level of some language (German, AAVE etc), but rather by the linguistic job it is doing (its use) in any given case.

or put on advertisements. Nonetheless, what comes directly before it is 'this word ["meaning"] can be explained in this way:'. The 'can' here is not one of raw possibility. One can try to explain any word using any technique one likes, and it might indeed be a successful explanation. If your friend is confused by what 'love' is, you could explain it by jumping up and down three times and showing them your belly button. It just is unlikely to work. The 'can' here is an offering of advice. It suggests to us how we might explain the word 'meaning' to someone who does not get it (someone who has a perfect survey does not need it explaining to them): we tell them 'the meaning of a word is its use'.[29] We can see from evidence in the Nachlass that this form of words was a careful choice. »Erklären« (explain) was chosen over »definieren«(define)[30]; the slogan as practical advice – 'this is how you would best explain something' – was chosen over the slogan as a way to access the truth – 'this is how you find out what the meaning of a word *really is*'.

Along similar lines, one can draw potentially very misleading conclusions from this slogan. Per Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is its 'use in language', the 'use in language' of a word is its grammar. A word can have several meanings, but whenever a word is sensefully used, it has a particular meaning (that is what gives it sense). Hence, a word has a grammar whenever it is used.

Nothing has gone wrong yet, but this is in danger of reifying what we found to be a piece of advice. We risk finding ourselves back in the situation Wittgenstein originally described as being 'as if the meaning were an aura the word brings along with it and retains in every kind of use'. Only, meaning is now understood as the potentiality of a word to be used in this or that way, its grammar.[31] This picture leads us to believe that in order to understand what someone means when they say a word, we must search for the potentiality that word has, its rules for usage[32]. Such a search could never discover a novel meaning.

There is a certain ambiguity in the phrase 'use in language'. If someone asks me what the use of a hammer is, I could say 'for hammering in nails'. If I meet someone who instead uses it as a paintbrush, he is using it in his own way. And yet, this encounter would be unlikely to change my answer to the question 'what is the use of a hammer?' For, the fact that one person uses a hammer a certain way does not change what the use of a hammer is. This relative stability of 'use' encourages us to believe that objects have uses more fundamental to them than what they are actually used for in any given case, and, abstracted from these cases, what they are generally (but need not be) used for. And where

29. The matter is slightly more complex than this; we could say he is not either teaching us what meaning is or telling us how to find out about meaning, rather meaning is that which we use these tools to teach/investigate (see MS-109, 140). Alternatively, it is on account of the nature of meaning that this works.

30. MS-142, 36.

31. PI§117.

This is the same misunderstanding that imagines family resemblance as a kind of particularly stretched out essence – meaning as a structure.

32. Hence Hacker's advice, often repeated in his lectures, that the first place to begin philosophical investigation of a word is to look it up in the dictionary. Though, practically speaking, this is wise advice.

then would be space for our novel use?[33]

## 2.3 A very ordinary way of meaning something new with one's words

Sometimes a useful technique to see things clearer is to replace a word that is saturated in philosophy with a synonym that isn't. Let us change the slogan to 'the meaning of a word is what we do with it in language'. If we are asked 'what do you mean by that word', we must just tell them what we are doing with it.

Imagine a police officer who walks up to a young man graffitiing and asks 'oi oi, what is the meaning of this'. Think about what answers he might give. That will give you a very approximate picture of what it is like to ask what someone means by a word, and to answer this question.

Wittgenstein means something special by 'nonsense' insofar as every time one uses a word one means something special by it, because one is doing something new with it that has never been done before. Wittgenstein writes 'If, from one day to the next, someone promises: "Tomorrow I'll come to see you" is he saying the same thing every day, or every day something different?'[34]. We are provoked by this to think, 'well, we could answer either way'. Hacker takes this to be a point about the limitations of *bare sameness*; that there is no 'sameness' outside of particular usages, such that one can never absolutely ask *forgetting all that stuff, is this just objectively the same action?*[35] But we should allow it to be a jumping off point to see how different usages in different circumstances, like on different days, are not trivial variations to a solid through line. Instead, different uses of the same word with (in a certain way) the same *meaning* can be vitally different. That is to say, it is not just that sameness is defined only by a rule, but that from a different perspective from the bare application of the rule we can notice critical and insightful differences between different instances of usage[36]. Consider as follows this practical example:

What is it like when you call someone beautiful? Here I want to say that everyone who I have known who has been beautiful has had their own beauty, and as such 'you are beautiful' has meant something different every time. And this is shown when you are asked 'what do you mean, I'm beautiful?' in the possibility of explicating this meaning differently every time, for it is a different person, or on this occasion the same person's beauty strikes you differently. On some occasions it means that so-and-so has very lovely eyes, or that their hair is

33. This tool analogy only works so far. A parrot that kills a man with a hammer is using the hammer, but a parrot that says 'good day' is not using the words, just repeating them. Nonetheless, a description of the usage of a word is just a description, without a use itself yet. 'But when one draws a boundary, it may be for various kinds of reason.' PI§499.

34. PI§226.

35. Hacker and Baker, *Analytical Commentary*, vol.2 202.

36. If I had all the time in the world I would draw in Deleuze and Guattari here. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 120: 'we were wrong to give the impression at times that constants existed alongside variables, linguistic constants alongside variable of enunciation: that was only for convenience of presentation'.

well done, or the shape of the face or their body strikes you in a particular way. This is a different 'word meaning' to how we typically imagine it. One does not learn the word 'beauty' anew every time one meets a new beautiful person. Or, perhaps one does, but this is not like learning the new word 'stopcock'. Nonetheless, this shows us a situation where we can talk of meaning of a word being something personal (if not private). This should allow us to see the possibility of meaning something vitally new with the same word.[37]

This point Wittgenstein makes too in his unpublished manuscripts.[38] He opens with the phenomenon of giving reasons for finding someone('s eyes) beautiful, and feels concerned that there is no obvious candidate for similarity to other cases of use of the word 'beautiful', like that of a church. As a balm he informs us that 'it will often be possible to say: ask what your reasons are for calling something good or beautiful and the particular grammar of the word "good" in this case will be apparent.' How exactly it becomes apparent is left to us to work out, but I would discourage anyone tempted to translate Wittgenstein's insight here into 'ask what kind of reasons the claim of beauty takes here'. That would be, to use the personal perspective of 'your reasons' to provide us an insight into the commonality of language. While this version of the question could provide interesting answers ('people often value symmetry of the face'), we could ask the identical question about the kind of reasons beauty ascriptions in general take ('people talking about beauty often consider form'), so it is not clear why this move to the more specific case of people's beauty would help our feeling of inability to say what beautiful things have in common. Indeed, the beauty of someone curved and smooth has, in a certain sense, more in common with the beauty of the Sydney opera house than they do with the beauty of someone who is all sharp edges and knobbles.

What purpose then does this shift to the specific have? We should read this remark as Wittgenstein groping forwards in time to agree with me personally, to encourage us to ask a meaningful question and to give a meaningful answer. And in the case of 'beauty', to understand the meaning, to grasp its use, is to gain the ability to contribute to a community of aesthetic judgements, to be able to say 'this is beautiful' and provide reasons. And if someone asks of any particular case 'how is this beautiful' (how is it that the word beautiful applies here, or how does the grammar of the word 'beautiful' relate to this case), the correct answer will be one that helps introduce the person asking into the correct usage of the word 'beautiful', and in this case the way to do that is not to talk about the commonality of all beautiful things, but rather to explain the reasons for our aesthetic judgement. We might want to say that someone only ever understands the meaning of the word 'beauty' if they begin

37. An objection could be made here that I am conflating different types of meaning. Perhaps you might claim 'what do you mean' can express different types of confusion other than one about word meaning, like a confusion about someone's motivation for saying something. But my point is exactly that the meaning of an utterance is *whatever* an explanation of the meaning explains. And this does not forbid different types of explanations. PI§560 '"The meaning of a word is what an explanation of its meaning explains." That is, if you want to understand the use of the word "meaning", look for what one calls "an explanation of meaning".'

38. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 24.

to determine their own preferences, their own criteria, their own use. And they only mature in relation to their understanding of beauty if their criteria changes, perhaps gradually, from use to use.[39] And here we are far away from any talk of a complete common meaning of 'beautiful'.

In the *Investigations* Wittgenstein builds a new therapeutic method. When he uses the word 'nonsense' during this therapy, he means the same by it that everyone else does, but he uses this familiar thing for something new. Its use stands at a certain spot, is said for certain reasons, has a particular effect, and so on. If an ordinary explanation of what 'nonsense' means does not satisfy us, all that is left is to explain this location.

If 'Wittgenstein's method' is just his way of doing philosophy, answering the question 'what does Wittgenstein mean by "nonsense"' is not something required to understand his method, but rather, understanding his method is required to know what he means by nonsense. Or better yet, both are understood simultaneously.

PPF§75 'the question is: "in what sort of context does it occur?"'

# 3 A broad survey: showing Wittgenstein intended to deploy the ordinary meaning of 'nonsense', as our understanding of Wittgenstein's ideas of word meaning suggested

The rest of this thesis will be dedicated to finding different ways to answer the question posed in PPFS75. The first approach I will take is to go through the first few uses of the word 'nonsense' in the *Investigations* and see what their immediate context can tell us about what Wittgenstein was trying to do with the word 'nonsense'.

**In S39** S39 is the first use of the word 'nonsense', and fits into our expectations from the literature. Wittgenstein writes 'then the sentence [...] would contain a word that had no meaning, and hence the sentence would be nonsense', seemingly laying out criteria for something being nonsense.

**In S40** 'When Mr N.N dies, one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say this, for if the name ceased to have meaning, it would make no sense to say "Mr N.N is dead"'[40]

Wittgenstein claims that 'when Mr. N.N dies the meaning of "Mr. N.N dies"' is nonsensical not because we could not mean anything by it, but rather *because* of the implications of its sense are unacceptable. For, it is exactly a senseful interpretation of the meaning dying that leads us to conclude it would make 'Mr. N.N is dead' nonsense. It is perhaps not a surprise then that the

39. The ability to engage in language has a lot in common with aesthetic engagement PI§527.
40. A similar example is MS-116, 322.

summary of the remark in Baker and Hacker's exegesis renders this as an argument ad absurdum, rather than proof that saying 'the meaning dies when the person dies' is nonsensical.[41]

**In S79** 'Should it be said that [when using names] I'm using a word whose meaning I don't know, and so I am talking nonsense? – Say what you please, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing how things are. (And when you see that, there will be some things that you won't say)'.

If Wittgenstein had intended to impart some criteria for nonsense, then surely these criteria would not designate *all names* as nonsense. Further, *all names* would not amount to some tricky edge case for a good theory of sense, but would be basic. If imparting such criteria was his intention, even just the basic criteria that we already know, the answer to the question 'are all names nonsense?' would be a simple 'no!'. Instead, he responds 'say what you please', which I read as something like 'either answer would work'.

Hacker reads this instead as ironic.[42] He does not provide any argument as to why this is the case, and it is not clear to me why it would be, apart from the fact that it is a bit of an odd thing for Wittgenstein to say (why would he be happy saying names are nonsense?!). But then, this turn of phrase is repeated elsewhere[43], and could be properly taken to be as much of a slogan as any other famous line.

The significance of Wittgenstein's move is to shift the focus here from assertion criteria to outcome, on what saying 'nonsense' would achieve. If it helps you see how things are, then you can say it, and if it does not help you see how things are, then you should not. Some things are very misleading, and if you see how things are you will not say them. This is one thing that Wittgenstein uses the dismissive gesture to do, then, is to *cause* someone to see how things are.

**In S119** S119 is a famous remark towards the end of a methodological interlude. Wittgenstein says 'the results of philosophy are the discovery of some pieces of plain nonsense and the bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language.' This line is to teach us about the very nature of philosophy. And yet, see how little we have to go by at this point if we tried to determine some technical meaning of the word 'nonsense'. Only one of the three previous uses give us anything approaching the conventional understandings discussed at the start of this essay, where there are some *conditions* for utterances being nonsense. While Wittgenstein uses the word 'nonsense' again later, you do not have that to go on unless you are reading the book through a second time or in an idiosyncratic order. So, we can say Wittgenstein

41. Hacker and Baker, *Analytical Commentary*, vol.1, 117.

42. Hacker and Baker, vol.2, 76.

43. PI§48 'Does it matter which we say, so long as we avoid misunderstandings in any particular case', PI§673 'one might speak of [...] if no problems are produced by this, it is harmless.'

did not have anything in particular in mind with the word 'nonsense' beyond the dismissive move we considered earlier. But if we can find where this normal use fits in, then 'nonsense' need not be some uninteresting gesture.

Mulhall is conscious that Wittgenstein does not nail down any definition of nonsense. He views it as something that speaks in the text's favour, claiming it allows readers to interpret 'nonsense' however works best for them, be it substantive, resolute, or something else.[44] There need not be anything wrong with this liberal perspective, but only in the sense that one can read texts in all sorts of unusual ways if one pleases[45] – think of Kripke's 'Wittgenstein's argument as it struck Kripke', which openly admits it is very likely not in line with Wittgenstein's intentions[46]. But we must balance the possibility of using a text for our own purposes against the evidence that there is no theory of nonsense in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

# 4 Surveying a single sentence: failing to discover context that would give the ordinary word 'nonsense' a novel application

One way of creating a survey is to cover a wide range, but another is to build a map[47] of just a single short section. To focus on the immediate surroundings of a (possible) usage of 'nonsense' will bring us to 'know our way about'[48] this region. I shall build here a survey of the method found in a single sentence of the (in)famous Private Language Argument.[49] I do expect my findings here explain more than just a couple of words, but even such a small achievement would be meaningful.

### A section of PI§243

> But could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences – his feelings, moods, and the rest– for his private use? – – Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language? – but that is not what I mean

The focus in analysis of the private language argument tend to be on what comes after this, when the conditions of a private language are laid out more

44. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 20.
45. Cavell writes nicely on philosophical texts as literary Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, 3–5.
46. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, 5.
47. Ambrose, 'Wittgenstein on Universals', 336, quoting Wittgenstein as saying that the problem with philosophy is the lack of a map.
48. PI§123.
49. Mulhall's short book on the Private Language Argument is brilliant; all that I write here will be, directly or indirectly, indebted to it. Obviously, direct references will receive citation.

explicitly. The little Mulhall does say about it (when describing the resolute perspective) is correct. He says (my emphasis):

> The first sentence sketches an idea – that of using language to give voice to our inner experiences for our personal use – and the rest of the paragraph distinguishes two different ways of filling it out. The first is exemplified by our ordinary life with language [...] composing a love poem, and so on; but Wittgenstein swiftly reject this as not what he *means*. The final two sentences specify what he *does mean.*[50]

The only significant correction to be made here is that Mulhall does not make any distinction here between the therapist and their interlocutor. It is not just that two ways of filling it out are sketched from a neutral position, rather the therapist suggests one thing the interlocutor could have meant, and the interlocutor *corrects* him with authority, 'that is not what I mean'. I will say more on this, including in section 7.

Despite the word »meinen« (to mean) being in the original text, it is conspicuously absent from Hacker's analysis of the remark. Instead, the interlocutor tells the therapist[51] 'what they had in mind'[52] or he 'clarif[ies] what a "private language" is supposed to be'[53].

Despite the lack of attention to this sentence, I think if we look carefully it might give us a microcosm of the whole method of the Private Language Argument. The structure of the sentence can be split into four sections as follows:

### 1. Interlocutor says something ambiguous

> 'Could we imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences – his feelings, moods, and the rest– for his private use?'

This is ambiguous. By which I mean: as competent speakers of English we know what the word private means and what the word inner means, but they have many uses, and it is not clear which is meant here.[54] It could even be a metaphor that we have missed, like if someone said '$x$ is my father' to mean '$x$ looks after me' and we (understandably but mistakenly) take them literally. This seems especially likely given our talk about our feelings and thoughts is steeped in metaphor – think of the (metaphorical) claim of the psychoanalyst that people have 'inner worlds'. We must speak further to the person who has

50. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 17.

51. I will use the term 'therapist' for the person administering the philosophical therapy on the interlocutor. For discussion of this separation see section 8.

52. Hacker and Baker, *Analytical Commentary*, vol 3, 32.

53. Hacker and Baker, vol 3, 3.

54. This case is transparently different to other cases of ambiguity like the word 'bank'. The ambiguity surrounding 'bank' is whether different words are meant, and the example here is different meanings of the same word, including secondary ones like metaphor.

made this utterance to determine their intended meaning: perhaps metaphorical, literal, or nothing at all.

**2. Therapist suggests a clarification/explication of this claim and follows it through to demystification**

> 'Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language?'

Wittgenstein writes in MS115 47-8 about the case of clearing up ambiguity around what someone else means with a word[55], he writes:

> What is the meaning of a word when the speaker cannot specify it? Well, perhaps we could describe his (actual) behaviour as a wavering between several connected meanings. I ask him: 'what did you actually mean?' – and as an answer he will give us several things, and maybe he'll ask me if I'll furnish him a list of rules to help. Oftentimes, the expression 'so, you actually wanted to say...' will turn up in our discussion. And this can very easily be misunderstood: namely, it does not need to be a description of an occurrence which consists in saying one thing while[56] you want to say something else; as if, what you 'actually wanted to say' was somehow already expressed, if not out loud.
>
> One of the most confusing turns of phrase is the question 'what do I mean by that' – In most cases you could answer: 'Nothing at all – I am saying...'

My translation

Wittgenstein tells us if neither the person using a word nor I know what he means, we do not presume what he says to be meaningless, nor do we turn to the dictionary, rather we engage with him in conversation and discover what he meant.

We should note that in our example sentence from S243 this step is not manifested in an open-ended question like 'I don't quite get you, can you maybe say more?', instead Wittgenstein suggests something that could have been meant and sees if our interlocutor will accept it: the language that gives expression to our inner thoughts and feelings could just be our ordinary language. This is a demystification, insofar as it answers a question which feels like it touches on something fundamental and difficult to get hold of in an ordinary way.

It is worth noting that the section quoted above is immediately followed by an earlier version of PI§335, which in its final form makes a very similar point.

55. MS136,13b is perfect on this too; Wittgenstein describes use of discussion to determine whether a statement is nonsense.

56. This *while* must be understood literally here, in terms of time. That is to say, there is nothing wrong with saying 'while I said this I really meant...', as long as you don't imagine what they really meant already sitting there in their head. See paragraph on psychoanalysis in the same section as this quote.

Rather than considering finding an expression for what we mean (or what someone else means), Wittgenstein covers finding an expression of a thought. Of this he says 'This way of speaking [find an expression...] compares the process to one of translating or describing: the thoughts are already there [...], and we merely look for their expression. The picture is more or less appropriate in different cases'. And then goes on to talk about discovering an expression for what one really thought through various different types of contemplation. Of course, this does not mean that the thought (or meaning) was already sitting in our head in a spooky way, rather it is licit (part of our grammar) to talk about discovering the meaning of someone's statements after they said it, or to find an expression for a thought after one has thought it. We might want to say that it is not that the meaning is already present, but rather that it is developed in discussion. Nonetheless, this thing covered is still correctly called what one did mean.

### 3. Interlocutor claims that this is not what they mean

> 'but that is not what I mean'

This quote is hopefully self-explanatory. This is the most tenuous of my described stages, though, because it only occurs explicitly at this point. No other remark of the private language argument gives the interlocutor the final word. Nonetheless, the way the discussion moves on after each remark might suggest that the interlocutor is satisfied enough that they do not feel the need to interrupt with a new comment. Perhaps there is an unspoken 'certainly Socrates' between the lines. It is nonetheless important that the end of a remark is rarely the end of the matter, instead we consider a different element of the interlocutor's specification of private language, considering in turn whether there is something in particular that the interlocutor was getting at. There is not simply an unspoken agreement between remarks, there is an unspoken 'but yet!'. At no time does Wittgenstein declare victory, call a problem solved. Instead, he keeps going round and round on the same topics for the whole book. Perhaps we could go as far as to say this is because there is not some claim being disproven, but an urge, a dissatisfaction with appearances being cured. And the only way to treat the urge is to constantly take what the other person says seriously, follow our princess to another castle.

To turn these thoughts into a concrete claim, I wish to show that the interlocutor need not be satisfied by what Wittgenstein says. In actual philosophical discussions, people move on for all sorts of reasons other than agreement.[57] I wish to argue this for remark PI§244 of which I will now quote a section (emphasis original):

> How do words *refer* to sensations? – There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and name

57. This relies on imagining the *Investigations* as a real dialogue, something I will argue for in 8.

> them? But how is the connection between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: How does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations?

Is the interlocutor happy with this explication of the original sentence? I think the last answer to the last question about *learning* is meant to satisfy the interlocutor's initial line of questioning about *referring*, while the question about *setting-up* allows for an intermediate step where 'referring' is functional day to day, but we are yet to realise it is brought about by ordinary learning. It seems at least far from self-evident that the interlocutor would be happy to allow for a question about the much discussed term of art 'reference' to be paraphrased into one about ordinary language learning.

This tension is not satisfactorily discussed in the readers I have chosen. While Hacker writes about the shift between questions, it does not add up to an argument for it. He does not comment on why the question about setting up follows that of referring. As to whether the question regarding learning answers the interlocutor's question about setting up, Hacker argues this transition is licit because 'to answer this [question on setting up] we must look to how the technique of its use is learnt, how we teach or train a person to use such words correctly – for there we shall see what it is that one who has learnt to use the word has thereby learnt to *do*'[58]. But this seems all wrong, as recognising the sufficiency of ordinary descriptions is the *goal* of this therapy, and as such can't be a suppressed premise. The question 'how do words *refer* to sensations' is a question stated by someone still in the fly bottle, we cannot presume that they already know that it can only be a question about learning.

Mulhall is stronger on this, describing the imposition of an interpretation as a challenge to the interlocutor to provide an alternate explanation. But he does not lay this out in detail, nor does he go as far as to claim that the interlocutor would not be satisfied.[59]

I think we have good reason to presume that the interlocutor would not be satisfied by this transition, such that we would imagine them to say (if they had been given a moment to get a word in) 'that is not what I meant'. The reference relation is one that holds between a word/phrase and an object. So, the interlocutor can be taken to ask 'what is the relationship between my expressions of pain and the deep, fundamental, private, pain itself' when he asks how words refer to sensations (to the Wittgensteinian this is of course a nonsense question). And such, 'how does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations' is a bad reformulating of the interlocutor's original question, for one can describe the learning process without describing the mechanics of the relation learnt. And such, the answer to it does not constitute an answer to his original question. So, when the interlocutor replies to Wittgenstein's story of learning 'you are saying that the word "pain" really means crying', it is not that he has been an idiot and not listened properly, it is just that he has tried

58. Hacker and Baker, *Analytical Commentary*, vol.3, 38.
59. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 24–5.

to see how Wittgenstein's response could have salience to his initial question about the relationship between the expressions of pain and the pain itself. The only possible salience being a denial of any connection, declaring pain to mean nothing but crying. Wittgenstein dismisses this interpretation of his words, saying that 'the verbal expression of pain replaces crying, it does not describe it'. The interlocutor has no response to this, the conversation moves on, the lesson is learnt. But, given that Wittgenstein doesn't seem to have answered the original question, we must either decide Wittgenstein has failed, think hard about how it might in fact constitute an answer, or decide that this is the entire point – the interlocutor is meant to feel dissatisfied with the response, and so will be increasingly tempted to give up on the whole business of finding an answer.

**4. Therapist takes him at his word** When the interlocutor tries again to lay out what they were trying to get at in S244 – when they describe the language they were imagining as 'the words of this language are to refer to [...] his immediate private sensations' – Wittgenstein takes them on their word, taking it as the basis for large parts of the rest of the dialogue. This is what is inherently responsive about Wittgenstein's method, to borrow Mulhall's language.[60] So, if we skip ahead to S272 he is humouring the interlocutor again, as they restate their position in new language, 'The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person posses his own specimen, but that nobody knows whether other people also have *this* or something else.' What they really meant by private language, they say, is epistemological access to specimens. And Wittgenstein does not say, 'hey, you've changed your goal-posts here', instead he takes the interlocutor on their word about what they really mean, always responsive to the dialogue.

'For only if he acknowledges it as such, is it the correct expression (psychoanalysis)'.[61]

But what place does 'nonsense' have on this map? We are at risk here of feeling more lost than we did before. Our dilemma is as follows. Because of our conception of word meaning (see section 2) and the lack of clear definition in the text (see section 3) we must find what Wittgenstein meant by 'nonsense' by looking at what place it has within the *Philosophical Investigations* as a whole (how Wittgenstein used 'nonsense'). If Wittgenstein's method is to teach us how 'to pass from unobvious nonsense to obvious nonsense'[62] then seeing where he started and where he ends up should show us what nonsense means to him. But, when we do a close reading of the famous private language argument it is difficult to see where nonsense should fit in. Here, then, I wish to show, taking the methodology of the private language argument I have described so far as our basis, *when* we would use the word 'nonsense' in a Wittgensteinian dialogue

60. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 52.
61. PO, 165
See also fn.78
62. PI§464.

as I imagine it, and *why* we would use it. This is as close as we can get to specifying a novel usage.

# 5 Where does being dismissive fit into the therapeutic method?

Must the therapist just humour the interlocutor endlessly? At what point would we reach the conclusion that what is said is nonsense?

**When the interlocutor gives up** This is how Mulhall imagines it 'He is left with a form of words, and a variety of ways in which they might coherently be taken; but none of those ways satisfy him – none capture what he had it at heart to say [...] then Wittgenstein implicitly invites him to ask himself why he is passionately convinced that his words mean something particular [...] and yet rejects any particular assignment of meaning to his words'[63]. This is essentially correct. If Wittgenstein does give over authority on what is meant to the interlocutor[64] (at least during philosophical discussion), then an utterance only means nothing when the interlocutor gives up on giving it a meaning. And if 'nonsense' is just a certain way of asking someone to stop saying something, that he can't tell us what he means by his utterance is a pretty good reason to ask him to stop saying it (to abandon his form of words), especially given that this constitutes evidence he doesn't know himself what he means.

The interlocutor never gives in. The end of the Investigations is quite abrupt, and the discussions go on and on in the Nachlass. But if these conversations are a literary device, perhaps they end when we lose the urge to reach beyond the limits of language and close the book. Or perhaps, the conversation must go on because this is a temptation that Wittgenstein always felt within himself, and always again had to learn to deal with – a permanent revolution, but a revolution overthrowing nonsense no less.

**When the therapist gets annoyed at the interlocutor** [65]

This is a picture of a very tolerant Wittgenstein, calm, relaxed and polite. In others words, it has mischaracterised him.

Mulhall tells us that 'It remains open to him [the interlocutor] to imagine another such way [to capture the meaning], and thereby to find the satisfaction he seeks'[66]. And we could indeed imagine someone sitting in a stool for years until one day they find a form of words that brings them satisfaction. But at some point it will become wise for the interlocutor to give up, and as long as he has not, the therapy to cure the urge has not been successful. We can tell

63. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 19.

64. See section 7 for a detailed discussion of authority over word meaning.

65. A connection between Wittgenstein's impatient *character* and his impatient *writings* is drawn in the somewhat obscure Hintikka, *On Wittgenstein*, 5. But here it takes more of an accusation that Wittgenstein doesn't show enough of his working.

66. Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 19.

him that, even if he goes on to ignore us. We can stop humouring him, at least a little bit, for just a second.

Let us imagine for a second that Wittgenstein had, at some opportune moment in the dialogue, included the words 'f**king hell'. PI§173 could be rendered '"But being guided is surely a particular experience!" – f**k me! well, the answer to this is....'. Would this make the dialogue worse? Would Wittgenstein be less likely to achieve his goals? This question is akin to that of: is there a place for crude expressions of anger and frustration in our interactions with others? I feel myself, perhaps incorrectly, that vulgarity can make something clearer than any sanitised expression could. Let us imagine 'nonsense' like this 'f**k you'. The purpose is to make something particular clear, and that thing is not just an expression of frustration. Maybe we want to say, with it we embody our meaning, if this is not too metaphorical. If someone steals our parking spot and we inform them 'this makes me greatly angry', and they nonetheless choose not to move, and so we tell them to go f**k themselves, they could respond to us 'sorry, I had no idea you were so angry!', then leave. And this need not be a lie, even though we had already told them. This is how it is when doing philosophy too. We must not forget we are not there to mess around, and irritability can be a small reminder of that, be it through the word 'nonsense' or 'f**k'.

We can see this moment of harshness over humouring by thinking about a seeming contradiction in the Investigations:

> To say 'Only he can know what he intends' is nonsense PPF§238

> 'Only you can know if you had that intention.' One might tell someone this when explaining the meaning of the word 'intention' to him PI247

One could easily imagine explaining the word 'nonsense' with the third-person perspective of PPF§238. Therefore, Wittgenstein seems to simply contradict himself here, at one moment calling a statement nonsense, then later calling the same one senseful. But Wittgenstein does not truly contradict himself. In the second case, he humours the interlocutor by suggesting some slightly niche case where their statement would make sense. In the former, he decides against humouring them, and is instead dismissive.

# 6 What is bad about the things we call 'nonsense'?

I see two ways of answering the question 'what does Wittgenstein use the word "nonsense" to do'. One of them looks to the immediate goal – we want to get someone to see that they do not mean anything by their words, and in doing so to get them to stop saying it. But we might be interested in our questioning not in the space 'nonsense' has within the set goals of philosophical therapy, but rather in the goals themselves. Why is it that in cases where the interlocutor is unable to explicate what they mean by a form of words, we choose to use a

technique that attempts to get them to stop saying it (i.e. we call it 'nonsense')? We want here to find something out about Wittgenstein's 'nonsense' by working out, simply put, what's wrong with it.

## 6.1 Good nonsense

A good starting point is to notice that Wittgenstein does not in actual fact have an absolute negative attitude towards nonsense.

**A nonsense image can be a useful one** In *Culture and Value* Wittgenstein writes: 'Don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! Only don't fail to pay attention to your nonsense'. Except, *he* does not write it in Culture and Value, this is one of the remarks from Wittgenstein's notes culled after his death into the book that became Culture and Value. And the broader context from the original manuscript is even more interesting! (and therefore bears quoting in full (with my own translation)):

> 'When I look outside I see it's raining; when I look inside myself I see that I don't believe it.' Where are we meant to begin with this statement?
>
> How would we interact with people with split personality; & how would they interact with each other? How would such a language game look? – that is the question.
>
> 'Assuming it's raining & I don't believe it' – if I believe what this assumption assumes, – then I split, so to say, my personality.
>
> Indeed, do not shy away from talking nonsense! Only, you must listen carefully to your nonsense.
>
> 'Then I split my personality' means: Then I am no longer playing the usual language game, but rather a different one.

My translation of MS-134,20-21

Here, in a reference to Moore's paradox, Wittgenstein considers the possibility of perceiving one thing but believing the opposite. This goes against the grammar of 'I see that $x$', because 'I see that $x$' implies an assertion of $x$, and asserting $x$ implies a belief that $x$. Note that the first person present is important here; there is no contradiction to say 'I saw that it was raining but I did not believe it was raining because I was in denial'. By using the word[67] in a way that contravenes its grammar a nonsense statement has been created. And yet, Wittgenstein tells us that we should not shy away from speaking nonsense here! Although our ordinary grammar is contravened, this might only mean that the words are being employed for a different purpose. Wittgenstein interprets

67. In a certain sense a word used in a nonsense statement is meaningless it is part of a nonsense statement, so we either want to say it is only the word in a certain different sense, or it is something that looks or sounds exactly like an instance of the word, but is not really it, but this similarity stuff is what we care about now.

this nonsense statement into an image[68], and says that it is like ('so to say') imagining ourselves as having a split personality. So far this image does not do anything, does not have any clear implications; it is just a way of imagining this statement as novel – '"Then I split my personality" means: Then I am no longer playing the usual language game, but rather a different one'. This is not an issue as long as we are aware of it ('Indeed, do not shy away from talking nonsense! Only, you must listen carefully to your nonsense'). From this point we can make a use of the image or not. One possibility for an alternate sphere of usage is poetry (See MS-136,88a-b), or even potentially allegorical everyday language (PI§295).[69]

**Intentional nonsense** There are cases where nothing is meant at all by a phrase that are nonetheless not misuses of language to be corrected. For example, intentional nonsense. Here, we can think of PI§498:

> When I say that the orders 'Bring me sugar!' and 'Bring me milk!' have a sense, but not the combination 'Milk me sugar', this does not mean that the utterance of this combination of words has no effect. And if its effect is that the other person stares at me and gapes, I don't on that account call it an order to stare at me and gape, even if that was precisely the effect that I wanted to produce.

Here, one says a nonsense statement *for a particular purpose* and nothing at all has gone wrong. Philosophy lacks this intention to produce nonsense, but it does not at first glance preclude it being a similar case of nonsense being used to good effect (Consider: what about the image of the fly in the fly bottle (PI§309) tells us that showing the fly the way out is desirable?).

**Speaking nonsense as part of a senseful game** Imagine the following game. A group of participants sit in a circle taking turns to say nonsense while everyone else gapes (this is part of the game). The nonsense master, who sits in the middle, then gives each piece of nonsense a score, either one, two, or three. We could imagine a version where the game master based their scores of criteria that stood in relation to our conception of sense, so she would score highly sentences that violated our rules of grammar in an exquisite way (variation A). Perhaps 'colourless ideas sleep peacefully' tickles one in just the right way to earn a three. Or, we could imagine that they base their scores on the characteristics of the sound, or on the hairstyle of the speaker (variation B)– here 'fwhebbib'

68. I spoke to one person who told me that they thought this interpretation was from the interlocutor. Here, I read everything but the section in speech marks as being Wittgenstein.

69. Wittgenstein also writes positively about nonsense in: Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics* For another example of nonsense utterances that are brilliant insofar as they provide a philosophically interesting image, see the work of 5.5 year old child philosopher Stei: When asked 'what are names for', he responds 'They are what you see when you look at things'. Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, 64. See in this 'We find every childlike (infantile) theory again in today's philosophy; only not with the winning ways of the childlike' Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions, 1912-1951*, 131.

with pleasant plosives and a whistling 'w' would merit a three. The question I wish to ask is: in which way if at all would these sentences be 'nonsense'?

The immediate comparison from the *Investigations* we would want to draw on is PI§498, quoted above. But, the analogy is not close enough. For, in the 'milk me sugar' example the nonsense statement is not an order to gape because it is just the effect of saying some nonsense series of words. It is not rule governed. If the 'other person' in this example did not stare and gape, he would not have failed to understand what was said, would not break any rules. However, in the nonsense club example, not gaping would break the rules of the game. We could imagine someone new to the club, Thomas, failing to gape when Niamh, and old member, says 'hello, nice to meet you, I'm a grudeldy Schprug'. For he had misunderstood what had been said, thinking they were still in the 'making introductions' part of the ritual, and had not realised that the nonsense had already started.[70]

We might want to say that case B is senseful exactly how a goal in football is senseful, or a beautiful piece of music. Or, more provocatively, just like how a game of chess is senseful (which is to Wittgenstein of course analogous to language). We could clarify case B by saying: they are not using English words at all, they only are doing a particular ritual that includes what *sounds like* the words 'colour' and so on. Case A is even more interesting, insofar as it is parasitic on our normal word meaning. Words are chosen on account of their meaning in the real world, they retain these meanings, are combined to achieve nonsense, and yet they sit in a senseful place within a language game. We could imagine someone observing this club and saying 'Oh, none of this makes sense, it's all nonsense!'. And they might properly be told, 'it only seems that way, look at the tome of criteria', and be pointed towards a weathered tome of rules for proper construction of a good nonsense statement. If we said 'colourless ideas sleep peacefully' it would not mean three, it would mean nothing at all, yet it would be a meaningful move in a game played with words.

The challenge here is that we show what the difference is between this case and the philosopher, who makes certain remarks in the practice called 'philosophy'.

## 6.2 Bad nonsense

### You've said what you wanted and it has confused you

> Language is an instrument
>
> PI§569

> But is it a satisfactory answer to the scepticism of the idealist or the assurances of the realist[to say that the sentence] 'There are physical objects' is nonsense. For them it is indeed not nonsense. But as an answer one could say: this claim, or its opposite, is a futile attempt to express (something), which cannot be expressed in this way.

70. NB: this would not be an order to gape. See RC§1.66

My translation of OC§37

This quote we could read as follows: it's not going to work to tell the idealist that they're speaking nonsense, because it doesn't *seem like* nonsense to them – instead, we have to *show* that it's nonsense. But Wittgenstein does not write 'for them it does not seem to be nonsense', rather he writes 'for them it is not nonsense'. That is, 'within their circles this is not the kind of thing they call nonsense'. Or, in other words, the idealist or the sceptics are playing a language game, making (in a *certain sense*) meaningful statements. The failure of the sceptic or the idealist is not a failure to make sense (as if this were itself evidently desirable, or a concrete achievement) but a failure to achieve something they were trying to achieve.[71]

One possible candidate what the philosopher is failing to do is to have their work relate to the thing that they are trying to discuss (this is along similar lines as the criticism on page 9). A philosopher who theorises about what knowledge truly is will fail if they cannot show the relation this work has to the ordinary word 'knowledge'. Otherwise, their writing becomes disconnected from the study of anything in particular, an idle wheel.

### Philosophy as a breaking wheel [72]

> Burning an effigy. Kissing the picture of a loved one. This is obviously not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied
>
> *Philosophical Occasions*, p.123

In his foreword to Deleuze and Guattari's work *A Thousand Plateaus* translator Brian Massumi advises us 'The question is not: is it true? But: does it work?' This I find superb, and it reflects (unintentionally I am sure) the Wittgensteinian advice *say what you like, as long as it does not confuse you.* But Massumi's advice is good because that is how Deleuze imagines his philosophy, as pragmatic, as a tool box.[73] Above I have read the failures of philosophy in Wittgenstein's eyes as being a failure of efficacy. Yet, a key insight from Wittgenstein is that reasons, justifications, explanations, and so on, ought not to be universally sought or demanded. Rather, they have a particular space within our lives, a time and a place so to speak. Not everything we do is done

71. This is one point at which Wittgenstein sees the issue of philosophy as causing practical confusion. Other spots of note are Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 44, first remark, Malcolm, 'Portraits of Wittgenstein', 298, and Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, S3.20 'the wrong picture confuses, the right picture helps'.
Separately, contrast the practical failure of the philosopher to the example of the tribe who do rituals to summon the rain, who are not trying to do science and through failing in this effort creating a senseful practice that is not our science, they are just successfully performing their rain summoning rituals.PO, 121

72. Execution method involving wheel. Use in title intended as a counter-image to the idle wheel.

73. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, xiii–xiv.

for some purpose, there are things sometimes that we just *do*. Why is philosophy not this type of case? Here, though, this particular image of the kissing, of the satisfaction, is something we can work with. One does not kiss the picture of the loved one in order to bring about satisfaction. One might continue doing it after it provides satisfaction no more, or perhaps the satisfaction it brings will change over time, like a ritual whose origin is lost in time. Yet, something need not have a purpose that has failed in order to be bad. Rituals can take someone over like an illness.[74]

Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Solaris* takes place on a space station orbiting a planet which produces a replication of someone from the past of each person who spends a night there. Psychologist Kris Kelvin is visited by a replication of his dead wife, who committed suicide. He declares himself in love with this figure. It is crucial here to see that this is not a story of a man who is delusional, who believes himself to be in a relationship with someone who is dead. He knows she is not his wife, and she knows she is just an apparition. His time spent with her is not a 'futile attempt'[75] to achieve something. He kisses only a symbol of the memory of her, a vivid picture of a lost loved one, and feels satisfied. Yet, by the end of the film he is feverish, a physical manifestation of terrible emotional turmoil this relationship with the replicant has brought on. He is not mistaken about anything. He is sick.[76]

In which sense does Wittgenstein think the philosopher is ill? In lieu of the space or time for a complete discussion of the concept of health I would like ever-so-quick to ask the reader to note how Wittgenstein describes philosophy like an obsessive compulsion; he describes philosophy as an 'urge'[77] to be cured through therapy, for example. This is not to say that 'philosophy' is a mental illness in any of the sense that we use the term, pathological, requiring perhaps even medication, only that it is unhealthy for the mind.[78] We should note that when Wittgenstein's method was publicly compared to psychoanalysis by one of his students it is reported by Malcolm that he declared angrily 'They are different techniques'.[79] These are surely the words of someone who sees similarities, and

74. In this way, a ritual is called nonsense (negatively) if it is one that constitutes a particular type of illness. So, nonsense is not something that confuses people, makes them ill in a certain way. But it is exactly nonsense insofar as it is confusion.

75. OC§37, reference to quote discussed on page 27

76. Tarkovsky, *Solaris*
In this film man who is sick with suppressed grief and guilt is made more ill by this relationship with a replicant. I then draw here an analogy to the philosopher who is ill with this dissatisfaction with language and made more ill by doing philosophy. We can find an unexpected midpoint in this dialectic at Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions, 1912-1951*, 123, where doing philosophy makes someone suffering from grief more ill. We see again philosophy as an unhealthy way of mind.

77. PI§89.

78. On this matter, and on my earlier observation of the connections between Wittgenstein's work and psychoanalysis, it would be regrettable not to make some reference to Wisdom's very interesting work on the matter. See Wisdom, *Philosophy and Psycho-analysis*, 169–181
For brief references to Wittgensteinian philosophy as dealing with desires etc see:
Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, 334
Crary and Read, *The New Wittgenstein*, 7, 41, 95.

79. Malcolm, 'Portraits of Wittgenstein', 300.

yet vital differences, between their work and the work of a psychoanalyst. A different technique is a crucial difference, but not (necessarily?) one in kind.

# 7 Does it imply complete first person authority over utterance meaning?

*First person authority* over the meaning of an utterance in a philosophical discussion has been a central theme in this essay. If I am wrong about it (as Hacker felt I was when I discussed my work with him), then my description of Wittgenstein's dialogue as ceding authority to the interlocutor must be wrong too (unless I wish to conclude Wittgenstein was himself fundamentally mistaken).

Hacker suggested to me the famous section from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* as a case that shows we do not have authority over what our words mean. Here, Humpty-Dumpty claims that when he says 'glory' he means 'a nice knock-down argument', and, when Alice objects, he tells her that he has complete authority over what his words mean. This is taken to be absurd because the meaning of the word 'glory' is determined by the rules of English. I find this situation is not as clear-cut as it seems at first, for this Humpty character seems not quite with it, and we might well react like Alice 'too much puzzled to say anything'. Like Alice we might allow his claim to be the master of his meaning and ask him whenever confused 'Would you tell me, please, [...] what that means?'.[80]

Nonetheless, there are more everyday situations where we do not give people authority over what they meant with their words. Psychiatrist and early follower of Wittgenstein Maurice Drury argues that it is important for the psychiatrist to consider not just what medical professionals like to believe their diagnoses mean, but what they will actually mean to the patient. Hence, there is no point saying that when a doctor diagnoses a woman with hysteria they doe not mean anything sexist by it, as this is not what the word will in actual fact do (and therefore mean).[81]

But if we look at this example, what is at stake is *not* some additional factor to how his words are going to be taken. We could equally say to him 'OK, *maybe* that is what you meant, but this is not how it will be understood'. There is no space here for some additional question of what the diagnosis objectively meant. The first person authority that I advocate for only amounts to assenting to the claim 'this is what I really meant' during philosophical dialogue. Someone might say 'in this case I was using these words to say y' and if you are in a good mood you might say 'well that wasn't a good idea, that's not what that meant to me or anyone else!' or you could say 'oh, sure, now I get you'.

80. Carroll, *Through The Looking Glass*, chap.6.

81. Drury, *The Danger of Words*, 19-21, we can connect this to 'say what you want as long as it does not confuse you' by saying 'say what you want as long as it does not confuse your patient'.

# 8 Does it require imagining dialogue in the *Investigations* as taking place between two separate people?

Wittgenstein, who barely published in his lifetime, was distinguished by his admirers in his ability in dialogue; Norman Malcolm tells us 'Wittgenstein had an extraordinary gift for divining the thoughts of the person with whom he was engaged in discussion'[82]. We can see this way of doing philosophy reflected in the form of the Investigations, which is often dialogue. I have written a great deal so far about the significance of this, about the contingency and contextuality of any claim that a statement is nonsense on the dialogue that is going on. Except, the *Philosophical Investigations* is *not* a dialogue between two people; it is a book written by one man. There is no real interlocutor whose thoughts Wittgenstein is so skilfully divining. It is important, then, to consider whether the actual form of Wittgenstein's book affects my reading.

Our problem is not that this is not a real conversation but rather just an imagined one; we have no specific reason to take it as representing conversation between two people at all. Sometimes readers see it as a discussion within the therapist/philosopher to clarify their own thought.[83] This could challenge things I've said so far, for I have considered the place of the declaration 'nonsense' in the relationship between the interlocutor and the therapist. But if we are to take this as a discussion within one person imagined as a discussion between two people, a self-therapy, then we ought to do so seriously. To say 'well they are not really two different people' is to refuse to buy into what is presented to us.

Imagining oneself as a separate person is not mere rhetoric, it is a common way of engaging with oneself that requires the genuine adoption of a position towards oneself as a second person. We can see this in the advice 'you should learn to love yourself'. 'Loving someone' is a relationship we can only have with someone else, not with ourselves.[84] And yet, if someone said in response to the advice that they love themselves, 'well, one can't love oneself, this is not how the grammar of love works', we would take them for an idiot. To request of someone that they love themselves is to request of them that they imagine themselves as someone outside themselves and act towards themselves based on this. So, for example, it is common for people to be self-critical to an unhealthy extent in a way they are not towards the people in their life that they love. For these people, learning to love themselves is to imagine themselves as one

82. Malcolm, 'Portraits of Wittgenstein', 299.

83. Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*, 38 and
Mulhall, *Wittgenstein's private language*, 21-22, about the relationship of the *Investigations* to Wittgenstein's personal anxieties about the limits of language

84. If you do not believe that self-love is loving yourself as if you were someone else, consider instead when one says 'if someone you love were like this, what would you think' as a way of helping someone get perspective.

of these people and to treat themselves with this same kind and understanding attitude. Internal philosophical dialogue is the same type of exercise. One imagines one were a stranger, in order to create a certain distance to affect a lack of self-understanding. And it is as seemingly nonsensical as self-love, for we ask ourselves questions about what we mean as if this knowledge were hidden from us like others are (sometimes) hidden. But – and this is the crucial part – this is what allows us to make progress. For, we often mistakenly presume complete self-knowledge, including knowledge of our meanings. The temptation to jump in at some point and say 'of course *I* know what *I* mean, I am a special source of authority here' is not wrong because you are not a special source of authority about yourself, but because the purpose of the exercise is pretending as if you were not. In the end, one might discover that one meant nothing at all.

In some way answering 'nothing in particular' to the question of what Wittgenstein meant by 'nonsense' would be good enough. There is no Wittgensteinian term of art that could be captured, that I have tried to capture. And indeed, if we wanted we could play the annoyed therapist here; we could declare the entire question to be itself nonsense. But 'nonsense', in its ordinary, boring, dismissive sense, sits in a particular place within Wittgenstein's philosophy. Laying that out has provided a satisfactory answer by what Wittgenstein meant by 'nonsense', for me at least. If it does not satisfy you, I'd suggest sitting down and thinking what kind of answer would.

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