

# The New Wittgensteinian View of Nonsense, From Sideways On

## 0. Introduction

There is an approach to Wittgenstein that is slowly becoming the standard interpretation.<sup>1</sup> Those people who follow the new approach have been named the *Harvard Wittgensteinians* by James Conant (2001a, 97), or the *New Wittgensteinians*, following on a published collection of essays with that title (Crary and Read 2000).<sup>2</sup> Their explicit view is that (a) Wittgenstein has no philosophical doctrines, and what is implicit in their writings is that (b) Wittgenstein is always right. Jointly these beliefs might seem to amount to a good reason to dismiss the New Wittgensteinians out of hand, but their position is worth discussing nonetheless, not least because they have interesting things to say about ethics, literature, and politics.<sup>3</sup>

I will argue that a strand of the New Wittgensteinian interpretation concerned with Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense cannot be sustained.<sup>4</sup> David Cerbone, James Conant, Cora Diamond, and Rupert Read prominently endorse the interpretation I will be concerned with in this paper, and are thus the primary targets of this paper. First, I will describe their position. Next, I will point out the relevance to it of Wittgenstein's discussion of family resemblance concepts; the New Wittgensteinians, I will suggest, read Wittgenstein uncharitably in that they have failed to appreciate that 'nonsense' is a family resemblance concept. Then I will point out

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<sup>1</sup> In Part II of her recent book, Anat Biletzki's gives the standard interpretations of Wittgenstein's philosophy, one of which is the New Wittgensteinian view (Biletzki 2003, 81-105).

<sup>2</sup> For many years their center was Harvard University's Philosophy Department. Influential figures in this group include Stanley Cavell, Warren Goldfarb, and, formerly, Burton Dreben.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the New Wittgensteinian articles that have something interesting to say about ethics, literature or politics include: Crary 2000a, Crary 2005, Cavell 2004, Cerbone 2003, Diamond 2002, and Minar 1991.

<sup>4</sup> 'New Wittgensteinian' might be a family resemblance concept, and there may be members of the family who have not committed themselves to what I regard as its central doctrine (Thomas Ricketts has been suggested to me as a possible instance). If there are, they fall beyond the scope of the paper.

that the New Wittgensteinians evidently have forgotten the insights Wittgenstein hoped to convey in the early sections (§§10-20) of the *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter “PI” with corresponding section or page number). I will survey some typical uses of nonsense to see what they bring to an ordinary language treatment of the word ‘nonsense’ and its relatives. I will subsequently consider the objection, on behalf of the New Wittgensteinians, that ‘nonsense’ is a term of art. Also, I will consider an objection on behalf of the New Wittgensteinians to the effect that their ‘view’, properly understood, is not a *view*, or a doctrine, at all. Finally, I will conclude that the New Wittgensteinians have not looked at how nonsense behaves in our language. The most intently anti-metaphysical view of all has become a metaphysics of nonsense. The New Wittgensteinians have failed to heed Wittgenstein’s warning: “don’t think, but look!” (PI, 66)

## 1. The New Wittgensteinian Dogma

The interpretation of Wittgenstein that the New Wittgensteinian reading uses as its foil has it that nonsense can be used to express ineffable truths.<sup>5</sup> In this section, I will begin by describing the foil’s view of Wittgenstein’s account of nonsense. Then I will describe the main components of the New Wittgensteinian view of nonsense. Finally, I will explore some consequences of the New Wittgensteinian view.

The foil’s interpretation of Wittgenstein has been called the *metaphysical view*. According to this view, there are things that a person cannot say but can only show. Nonsense can show what cannot be said. Thus, nonsense can be illuminating, deep, and important.

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<sup>5</sup> According to the New Wittgensteinians, the list of those who subscribe to the metaphysical interpretation of Wittgenstein’s work includes Frank Ramsey, Bertrand Russell, Elizabeth Anscombe, Norman Malcolm, David Pears, Gordon Baker, and P.M.S. Hacker.

The metaphysical view thus presumes a distinction between two sorts of nonsense – illuminating nonsense and plain nonsense. Plain nonsense is simply gibberish or word salad. The metaphysical view does not take plain nonsense to be Wittgenstein’s only conception of nonsense. According to the metaphysical view, Wittgenstein furnishes a method for distinguishing meaningful from meaningless discourse. On the metaphysical view’s reading of the *Tractatus* (hereafter “TLP” with section number), Wittgenstein believes the sense of a sentence determines when the sentence is true and when it is false. Since tautologies are true under all conditions, there is no way for a tautology to be false. So, tautologies and, likewise, contradictions lack sense (are *sinnlos*), without being nonsense (*unsinnig*). Lacking sense means that a proposition fails to sort out the possibilities; for a proposition to be counted as nonsense still allows it an ineffable content: nonsense shows what cannot be said. If Wittgenstein thought that we see through intelligible nonsense to its ineffable content, and if Wittgenstein says that his work contains nonsense, then his readers should respond to this brand of nonsense by trying to do just that. The ineffable truths about reality are the only thing “one is left holding on to... after one has thrown away the ladder” (Hacker 2000, 357).

The New Wittgensteinian sees the metaphysical view as diluting what Wittgenstein says about nonsense, by insisting that he does not really mean what he says (Conant 1993, 197). As Burton Dreben once put it: “Wittgenstein said philosophy was nonsense, and, by God, he meant it!” We are advised to throw away the ladder *completely*, which amounts to rejecting the notion of ineffable truths, per the metaphysical view’s interpretation (Diamond 1991, 198). For the New Wittgensteinian, what cannot be shown cannot be said, either.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, nonsense can be shown and can be said, but what the nonsense *says* can be “neither shown nor said.” For this point, see Conant 2000, 196.

Notice that some claims about nonsense would be philosophical theses, on anyone's view. The New Wittgensteinian hopes to bring us to abandon philosophical theses and philosophical arguments. Thus, when we are told that nonsense is neither profound nor interesting, charity requires us not to construe this claim as a philosophical thesis.

According to the New Wittgensteinians, an interpretation of Wittgenstein is thoroughly misguided if it attributes to him the view that nonsense can be shown but not said. The New Wittgensteinians claim that any interpretation on which nonsense conveys some ineffable truth about reality is 'chickening out.'<sup>7</sup> 'Chickens,' the New Wittgensteinians claim, surrender to the illusion of profound nonsense because they have been seduced into thinking that nonsense shows us something even though it fails to say anything. For example, proponents of the metaphysical view think that membership in this or that logical category can be reflected in distinctions between signs, even though the distinction cannot be put into words (Hacker 1972, 20-24). The metaphysical view is cowardly for precisely this reason.

New Wittgensteinians think that all nonsense is plain nonsense, and they point to PI §500 in support of their interpretation:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Because the metaphysical view considers nonsense transparent enough to show the ineffable truths that lie behind it, the New Wittgensteinians take the metaphysical view as the fundamental case of 'chickening out.' Diamond writes, "To chicken out is to pretend to throw away the ladder while standing firmly, or as firmly as one can, on it" (Diamond 1991, 194f).

<sup>8</sup> There is a tradition in Wittgenstein scholarship separating the *Tractatus* and other early works from the *Philosophical Investigations* and other later works, and one might object that I am conflating the two different views in this paper. The New Wittgensteinians think that either Wittgenstein is deeply continuous from early to late or that he changed his mind. If the New Wittgensteinians think that Wittgenstein changed his mind, then their view is a reading of early Wittgenstein. On this reading, the later Wittgenstein rejected the view that the New Wittgensteinians are reconstructing, and I am laying out good reasons for so doing. If the New Wittgensteinians believe that Wittgenstein's view is continuous from early to late, then my argument draws on what is – at a suitably deep level – one view.

When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation. (PI, 500)

If nonsense is unintelligible, and if all nonsense is equally nonsense, then nonsense does not divide into different species.<sup>9</sup> There is nothing that nonsense can show, and so nonsense fails to gesture at ineffable truths in the way the metaphysical view claims it does.

Given that the metaphysical view argues that ineffable truths lie behind what appears to be nonsense and this implies that nonsense comes in different species, and given that the New Wittgensteinians claim that nonsense fails to say or show anything and nonsense cannot be distinguished into types or sorts, there are two consequences of the New Wittgensteinian view that deserve consideration, if for no other reason than that they imply it is a queer view.

First, we might think that the New Wittgensteinian's austere conception of nonsense is a philosophical thesis, but the New Wittgensteinians say that all attempts at philosophical theses are nonsense (Floyd 1998, 83f). If the New Wittgensteinian view is correct, then Wittgenstein offers no philosophical theses and fails to provide philosophical arguments for his view. The New Wittgensteinians might adopt the view – and some of them do adopt it - that their own conception of nonsense is among the things that count as nonsense.<sup>10</sup>

Since philosophical theses compose philosophical arguments, a second consequence of the New Wittgensteinian view is that there are no philosophical arguments. Since there are no

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<sup>9</sup> Cora Diamond says, "I believe that the *Tractatus* takes what you might call an austere view of nonsense. Nonsense is nonsense; there is no division of nonsense" (Diamond 2000, 153). James Conant says that the austere conception "holds that mere nonsense is, from a logical point of view, the *only* kind of nonsense there is." [emphasis added] (Conant 2001b, 97).

<sup>10</sup> [ACKNOWLEDGEMENT].

philosophical arguments, there are no arguments for the New Wittgensteinian view either. So it is only natural for someone to wonder why their view is philosophically compelling.

As readers of Wittgenstein's work, we are not supposed to draw conclusions about which he writes. We are to read his works to understand *him* and the kind of activity in which he engages, and all this in the service of reevaluating ourselves. Thus, the importance of Wittgenstein, according to the New Wittgensteinian, is his therapeutic value. If understanding is not accompanied by inner change, then the New Wittgensteinian view has failed Wittgenstein.

## 2. Family Resemblance Concepts

The New Wittgensteinians want us to appreciate that nonsense can be neither said nor shown. Nonsense lacks ineffable content. Since there is nothing mysterious about nonsense, and there is a clear distinction between those utterances we deem nonsense and utterances we think have sense, 'nonsense' on the New Wittgensteinian interpretation, is something like a crisp Fregean concept. Fregean concepts have clearly demarcated extensions. On the Fregean model, we should expect there to be necessary and sufficient conditions for being nonsense. And the New Wittgensteinians provide something on the order of a perspicuous definition: we have nonsense just when a combination of words has not been given a use.

In this section, I want to challenge the New Wittgensteinian view by reminding the reader that not all concepts are Fregean. (Indeed, Wittgenstein thought there to be no essence to language; 'language' itself is a family-resemblance concept.) If 'nonsense' is a family resemblance concept, then many different sorts of nonsense, sharing no single common feature, will be grouped together by a network of similarities.

It is well known that Wittgenstein uses games to show that not all concepts are Fregean (PI, 71). Looking at different kinds of games, for example, card games, board games, street games, etc., it is tempting to think that there is something common to all of them. However, every time one is tempted to think that one has found the common and defining property of all games it fails to appear in one of the examples. Perhaps you initially thought that having a winner was a necessary property of a game, but there is no winner in Snake Dodge Ball (Indian File Dodge Ball)<sup>11</sup> or Whomp'em.<sup>12</sup> You might have thought that fairly definite rules were a fundamental part of games, but there are no rules in Pong. Most games presume that players must not cheat, but even this presumption is overturned by video games whose manufacturers provide players with "cheat codes."<sup>13</sup> The implicit claim is that, for any candidate set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a game, we can find (or create) a game that does not satisfy those conditions. There is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a game.

Wittgenstein's alternative proposal is that games are grouped together by many and varied overlapping similarities; that games have a family resemblance to other games.

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<sup>11</sup> Five or six players stand in a line in the center of a circle formed by the rest of the players. Each player in the line puts his arms round the waist of the player in front. The object of the game is for the players around the circle to hit the player at the end of the line, or snake, below the knees with the ball. The snake can move around inside the circle to make this more difficult. When the player at the back of the snake is struck by the ball, he leaves the snake and moves into the circle of throwers while the player who threw the ball joins on as the front man of the snake. The game carries on for as long as you wish.

<sup>12</sup> Players get in a circle facing in, with both hands, palms up, behind their backs. Players must be looking into the circle. One player, with a rolled up newspaper, walks around the outside of the circle. When he chooses, he puts the newspaper into the hands of a player, who then proceeds to "whomp" the player to his right. The player being "whomped" runs as fast as he can around the circle back to his starting position. The player now holding the newspaper walks around the outside of the circle, looking for a player to whomp the person to his right, as above.

<sup>13</sup> A "cheat code," available in games for the PC, Nintendo, X-Box or PlayStation, is some entry that turns on a feature that otherwise would not be available to the player had she not purposefully turned it on at that time. For example, in the game "XIII," while playing the game if the player presses the F2 key and enters "maxammo" in the dialog box, she will have access to an unlimited amount of ammunition for the duration of the game. Also, if the player presses the F2 key and enters "healme[#]" in the dialog box with a corresponding number (say 100 or 90) for some percentage, the player's injuries sustained during a battle will be healed according to that percentage.

((ACKNOWLEDGEMENT))

To vary the example, consider the concept of number.<sup>14</sup> For any list of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a number, we can find (or invent) something we call ‘numbers’ which does not satisfy the conditions on the list; again, types of numbers are related by family-resemblance similarities. You might have thought that all numbers were natural numbers, positive integers, but there are negative whole numbers. Perhaps you believed that all numbers were expressible as fractions. Irrational numbers, however, cannot be expressed as a fraction  $p/q$  for any integers  $p$  or  $q$ . Furthermore, you might have thought that any number must be an algebraic number of some degree, but a transcendental number is a number that is not the root of any integer polynomial. So it is not an algebraic number of any degree. You might have thought that summing a positive integer to a number gives you a larger number, but this is not true of transfinite cardinals. Thus, like games, there is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a number.

Wittgenstein writes:

Suppose that I were standing with someone in a city square and said [“Stand roughly there”]. As I say it I do not draw any kind of boundary, but perhaps point with my hand – as if I were indicating a particular *spot*. And this is just how one might explain to someone what a game is. One gives examples and intends them to be taken in a particular way. I do not, however, mean by this that he is supposed to see in those examples that common thing which I – for some reason – was unable to express; but that he is now to *employ* those examples in a particular way. (PI, 71)

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<sup>14</sup> Extrapolated from PI: 135.

The point is that there is nothing that the example hides from view, and so there is no essence of the word hidden beneath the surface (PI, 164). The example is one case out of a family of cases, and there is no common property they all possess; instead, there is only the network of similarities (PI, 66).

Since each bit of language shares something with other bits of language, what arises from these bits is a sort of linguistic conglomeration. The bits of language form a heterogeneous mass that we call language. Wittgenstein writes, “We see that what we call “sentence” and “language” has not the formal unity that I imagined, but is the family of structures more or less related to one another” (PI, 108). Wittgenstein therefore claims that language itself has the family resemblance structure. So we should be alert to the possibility that ‘nonsense’ too is a family resemblance concept.

Just as there are many different types of games that do not seem to share all the same characteristics, there are different types of nonsense, which possess characteristics that are not common to all of the types. Wittgenstein allows as much in passing: “even a nonsense-poem is not nonsense in the same way as the babble of a baby” (PI, 282). I will explore some of these different types of nonsense in Section 4 of this paper.

There is no single characteristic that permits one to say, for instance, “that *that* is what makes a game a game,” or “that *that* is what makes nonsense nonsense.” The New Wittgensteinians require ‘nonsense’ to be univocal, to have the structure of a Fregean concept. Having just characterized ‘nonsense’ as a family resemblance concept, in the next section, I want to develop a further reason for expecting that to be the case.

### 3. What We're Supposed to Learn from Train Cabins

Appearances can deceive: the further Wittgensteinian cautionary point is that the way nonsense looks and sounds is likely to mislead us into thinking that there is only one kind of nonsense. Once we have reminded ourselves of a well-known Wittgensteinian lesson, we should expect nonsense to come in different functional types.

Objects are built for our use. If objects are built for our use, then it is likely that their user interfaces will look pretty much the same. A favorite example of Wittgenstein's is the contents of a toolbox (PI, 11), but I will use a more contemporary example – office machinery. Fax machines, computers, business telephones, and copy machines have keypads whose construction is meant to accommodate the way we are built: the size of the keys on the keypad is approximately the width of an average finger. It goes without saying that fax machines, copiers, business telephones, and computers are put to different uses. Here is Wittgenstein emphasizing the idea that things which look the same might have radically different functions:

It is like looking into the cabin of a locomotive. We see handles all looking more or less alike. (Naturally, since they are all supposed to be handled.) But one is the handle of a crank which can be moved continuously (it regulates the opening of a valve); another is the handle of a switch, which has only two effective positions, it is either off or on; a third is the handle of a brake-lever, the harder

one pulls on it, the harder it brakes; a fourth, the handle of a pump:  
it has an effect only so long as it is moved to and fro. (PI, 12)<sup>15</sup>

One of the lessons we ought to have learned from Wittgenstein is that different bits of language may look the same, but have different sorts of functions. We are confused by “the uniform appearances of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print” (PI, 11). I take it that Wittgenstein uses primitive language-games, such as the ones he presents in PI §§2 and 8, to show that once our attention is drawn to the diversity of function among these primitive languages we cannot fail to notice a similar diversity within the language we actually speak.

Perhaps, then, even if nonsense looks and sounds pretty much of a piece as well, this is misleading. Given what Wittgenstein wants us to appreciate in his treatment of the train cabin, we should not be surprised if nonsense proves to have many different functions, even when it has a uniform outward appearance. I will now sketch a relatively straightforward taxonomy of nonsense in plain language to substantiate my suspicion that nonsense can be employed in the most various ways.

#### 4. Survey of Nonsense in Ordinary Language

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<sup>15</sup>If we remain unconvinced by the train cabin example and think that it is easy to distinguish between different kinds of office machinery, then there is the comparison of an automobile’s steering wheel and an aircraft’s yoke. The yoke and the steering wheel look very similar, just as the switches in the train look very similar. But a steering wheel turns the vehicle left or right on a vertical axis, while the yoke pitches the plane left or right on a horizontal axis (propeller to tail). The pedals control the turning radius of the aircraft on a vertical axis. The first time someone tries to taxi a plane by herself this can be extremely disconcerting. Though the steering wheel and the yoke look virtually the same, they function very differently. Hence, things that look the same may deceive us into thinking that they function the same way.

We have seen so far that there is reason to think that ‘nonsense’ is a family resemblance concept, and that nonsense may well have multiple functions, even if its appearance is somehow uniform. We will now consider these different functions – the different employments of nonsense. It is not a coincidence that Wittgenstein was called an ‘ordinary language philosopher,’ and in this section I will turn to ordinary usage. We will see that ‘nonsense’ fails to behave, in ordinary language, in the way that the New Wittgensteinians presume.

Let me survey a few types of ordinary nonsense. By ordinary nonsense, I mean what the man on the street would call ‘nonsense’. Examining what average persons think nonsense is will reveal that it has a complex array of uses. This will jibe with what Wittgenstein has taught us about family-resemblance concepts: nonsense is not a Fregean concept.<sup>16</sup>

New Wittgensteinians fail to respect the fact that nonsense is a family resemblance concept because they have become fixated on one kind of nonsense: an odd and exotic species of nonsense whose function is to serve as an *icon* of nonsense. They regularly cite examples of such iconic nonsense from the verse of Lewis Carroll or sentences like “Caesar is a prime number.”<sup>17</sup> It is worth pausing to note that even the iconic class of nonsense comes in different varieties.

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<sup>16</sup> I believe that some people would agree with me that nonsense has a complex array of uses. For example, Hans-Johann Glock (2004) has recently shown that there are different types of nonsense. He may have shown there are different types of nonsense, but he has not criticized the New Wittgensteinian on their own terms.

The trouble is that Glock’s approach leaves him susceptible to criticisms the New Wittgensteinians use against the metaphysical view. According to Glock, Wittgenstein offers an essentialist understanding of nonsense. Glock believes that he can establish the meaningful content of nonsense (1) by consulting a dictionary for the meaning of a word in a nonsense sentence or phrase or (2) by asking questions of the nonsense sentence or phrase (Glock 2004, 230). The essentialist understanding of nonsense commits Wittgenstein to ineffable truths. Glock turns out to be just as much a ‘chicken’ as any advocate of the metaphysical view. Glock’s conception of nonsense fails to criticize the New Wittgensteinian view because, like the metaphysical view, his view is that there is something illuminating, deep, and important about nonsense.

I agree with William Brenner’s assessment of Glock. He writes, in a review of Glock’s essay which appears in Ammereller and Fischer’s collection, “I believe that Glock’s criticisms of Diamond depend on ascribing to her some special, draconian notion of nonsensicality, over and above the ordinary idea of having failed to say anything” (Brenner 2005, 380).

On the one hand, I agree with Glock that there are many different types of nonsense, but, on the other hand, I do not share his view that nonsense is something deeply illuminating.

<sup>17</sup> Diamond (1991, 1988) gives many different examples of iconic nonsense.

Each type forms a subgroup that shares some characteristics without all of them having one fundamental or essential feature.

One subgroup of iconic nonsense – and perhaps the most amenable to the New Wittgensteinians – is word salad.<sup>18</sup> Word salad *is* completely unintelligible, and it is easy to think that it serves no linguistic function. But we have just observed that there is a use for word salad: it serves as an icon of meaningless discourse (which is why I have been calling it ‘iconic nonsense’). Word salad exemplifies nonsense, and as Nelson Goodman noticed, exemplification does not require a sample to exemplify all its properties (Goodman 1976, 52-57). A swatch of color, for example, calls attention to some of its features, exemplifying certain properties, but it does not exemplify all its properties. So, it is a mistake to suppose that all nonsense must be iconic nonsense.

Next, another subgroup of iconic nonsense works as a literary device. We find familiar occurrences of this functional variety in nonsense verse. While some iconic nonsense has the appearance of trying to say the unsayable – “Bradley took a front seat at the back” – and so conforms to the New Wittgensteinian caricature of their opponents, very similar-looking nonsense does not lend itself to this sort of construal at all. For instance when Lewis Carroll replaces meaningful terms with nonsense words in a grammatically well-structured sentence:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

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<sup>18</sup> Word salad – a subgroup of iconic nonsense – itself comes in different varieties. For instance, there is the variety where words are combined randomly, ‘runs evil sympathy petals digger’. The arbitrary combination of words has no discernible syntax and has no semantic value. A second variety is – what I will call – *monkey typing*, ‘hsdjfls hjsdfhkj weruiop sbnm,a’. As the story usually goes, if a monkey types for a long enough period of time, it will eventually type the works of William Shakespeare. Of course, the monkey would have to type for a long time, but for the most part what the monkey types resembles the string of characters above. There is nothing recognizable about the string, except that it contains letters. Finally for now, there is another variety where there is syntactic structure but the sentence lacks clear semantic content. For example, ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ (Chomsky 1975, 15).

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogroves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 1994, 1872, 35f)

Carroll is exploring the phenomenology of a dream; recall that *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* recounts young Alice's dream (Carroll 1998, 1865). When Alice attempts to recite her verses, they come out wrong: she tries to say one thing, but something else – something that makes no sense – comes out of her mouth. Nonsense here functions to create the impression of realism.

Similarly, the science fiction of Philip K. Dick is peppered with nonsense words, as when modes of transportation are named 'quibbles', 'flapples', or 'spinners'. We experience something like Barthes's 'reality effect', for something like the following reason: future English will contain new words for new gadgets, and these words could not be part of our language now. In a very different way, nonsense is adding verisimilitude – it is once again being deployed as a literary device.

There is no point in trying to imagine what word salad describes. 'Imaginable' nonsense, however, is nicely exemplified in the limericks of Edward Lear's *A Book of Nonsense* (1992, 1846). For example:

There was a Young Lady whose chin,  
Resembled the point of a pin;  
So she had it made sharp, and purchased a harp,  
And played several tunes with her chin. (Lear 1992, 1846, 16)

It is worth remarking that Lear's limericks are truth-evaluable at the sentence level. Philosophers who assume that a sentence is not nonsense if it has a truth-value have not been paying attention to the ordinary uses of 'nonsense'.

There is an academic kind of nonsense that is used to silence the listener or reader. In Richard Wolheim's descriptions of two of Titian's early paintings, *Concert Champêtre* and *Three Ages of Man*, he asserts "The mystery is there to be experienced, certainly not resolved: once we cease to find these paintings mysterious, we no longer understand them" (Wolheim 1987, 310).<sup>19</sup>

Yogi Berra's popular quotations function similarly: to silence the listener.<sup>20</sup> Berraisms include, for example, "I didn't really say everything I said" and "I usually take a two hour nap from 1 to 4." Most Berraisms take a Gricean explanation, on which what is conveyed diverges from the literal meaning of the words. Grice calls what is conveyed but is not a literal meaning 'implicated' (Berraisms are nonstandard instances of Gricean conversational implicatures because the sentence may not *have* a literal meaning; Grice 1989, 25). Conversational implicatures exploit the willingness of participants in a conversation to follow the Cooperative Principle, that one should further the goals of the conversation. Grice mentions subsidiary rules of cooperative conversational behavior: the Maxim of Quality, that the speaker should convey

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<sup>19</sup> Similar things have been said of famous murder mysteries, such as the Whitechapel murders, the case of Jack the Ripper (Rumbelow 1975, 25). Mysteries are not fully understood, since that is precisely what makes them mysteries. Solving mysteries shows us why they were mysteries in the first place. Thus, it is hard to believe that finding the paintings or the Whitechapel murders mysterious is a better means of understanding the events or the art than solving the murder or solving the mystery of the art. The reader or listener is not sure how to respond, or even *if* she should respond to Wolheim's statement.

<sup>20</sup> Musil's *The Man without Qualities* (1995) contains some Berraisms. One character says, "You know what he's like: these diplomats pretend to be ignorant even when they really are!" (Musil 1995, 1232) If a person is ignorant of some facts, then the person is not pretending. In this quotation, the diplomat is ignorant *and* pretends to be ignorant. One cannot pretend to be ignorant and be ignorant. A second example in Musil's story is: "It's totally irrational, but ultimately logical!" (Musil 1995, 1250) If something is irrational, then it follows that it is illogical. But it is not the case in this story. On page 1349, Musil introduces a character as being a 'universal specialist,' someone who specializes in everything. No one can be an expert in every subject. A specialist or expert knows one area very well.

true and justified information; the Maxim of Quantity, that the speaker should be as informative as possible; the Maxim of Relation, that the speaker should convey relevant information; and, the Maxim of Manner, that the speaker should be clear and try to be brief. For instance, if Mickey asks Yogi for directions to his house, then Yogi will give Mickey directions to his house rather than Yankee Stadium (relevance), Yogi may give Mickey more than one way to get to his house (quantity), Yogi will give Mickey the correct directions to his house (quality), and Yogi will do this efficiently (manner). If, at some point in their conversation, Yogi says to Mickey, “when you come to a fork in the road, take it,” the implicature is: *you can take either road to get to where you want to go*. Implicatures like that of Yogi’s utterance are explained in terms of the Maxim of Relation and the Maxim of Quantity. The information conveyed is both relevant (since Yogi tells Mickey how to get to his house) and satisfies the quantity requirement (since Yogi gives Mickey more than one route to use). Berraisms are nonsense that function according to Gricean rules of ordinary conversational implicature, precisely to convey straightforwardly paraphrasable information.<sup>21</sup>

There is a related type of nonsense found in some children’s stories; these are nonsense at the sentence level, but have clearly paraphraseable morals. I will call these types of nonsense *Seussisms*, after their perhaps most beloved author Dr. Seuss (Ted Geisel).<sup>22</sup> For instance, *And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry Street* relates the story of a child who tells his father about what happened on Mulberry Street that day. The child’s tale becomes more outlandish as the book nears its conclusion. By the end of the story, the boy’s father realizes that the child’s story is a lie. The child learns that lying is wrong, since telling one lie leads to telling another lie, and so

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<sup>21</sup> Unlike metaphysical nonsense that the New Wittgensteinians dislike, here nonsense is conveying what *can* be said. I want to thank His Majesty the Present Queen of Romania for assistance in working out the mechanics of this section.

<sup>22</sup> There are examples of Seussisms not authored by Dr. Seuss. For example, some of e.e. cummings’s poetry qualifies as Seussisms. See “anyone lived in a pretty how town” (cummings 1940, 29).

on. The outlandishness of the story does not make it nonsense, but the nonsense sentences do. (Of course, the primary function of Seuss's nonsense prose is to teach children a skill, in particular how to read. *The Cat in the Hat* was Dr. Seuss's answer to Dick-and-Jane readers.)

Another type of nonsense serves as a memory aid. Mnemonics are used to associate complex lists of information with easy-to-remember constructs. For example, someone might use the first letter of each word in a sentence to represent some important fact, as when the phrase "Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally" is a reminder of the order of operations in arithmetic – parentheses, exponentiation, multiplication/division, and addition/subtraction – or "King Penguins Copulate Often For Greater Satisfaction," is a mnemonic for the order of taxonomic groupings (kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species).<sup>23</sup>

Sometimes nonsense functions as a placeholder in conversation, as in this passage from William Irwin: "Because he was willing to give up what he cherished most, Abraham was awarded. His son and heir, Isaac, would survive; Isaac would beget Jacob, *yadda yadda yadda*. And so began the Kingdom of Israel" (Irwin 2000, 56).<sup>24</sup> Here a conventionalized nonsense phrase is functioning as an abbreviation device. This phrase can also be used as a propositional variable, for example, when someone says, "if the sun rises and blah, blah, blah, then I will go to school." The 'blah, blah, blah' acts as a substitutional variable for one or more propositions – a function which logicians cannot afford to dismiss.

Fashionable expressions function to indicate group membership, and some of these expressions are good examples of nonsense. Currently in vogue, for instance, the phrase "fo

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<sup>23</sup> There are many different examples of mnemonics. One mnemonic device enables a person to remember the digits of *e* or *pi* to a number of decimal places using a sentence where the length of each word corresponds to a number. For example, "How I wish I could recollect pi easily today" = 3.14159265.

<sup>24</sup> In association with the sit-com *Seinfeld*, there is an episode where the phrase "yadda-yadda-yadda" is associated with "we had sex." In this case, when the words no longer function as a gap-filler, the words no longer count as nonsense.

shizzle, ma fizzle” might function as an affirmative response to an interrogatory sentence.

Similarly, but somewhat more awkwardly, in the 1990s, people used the phrase “that’s phat” to indicate their satisfaction with some object or state-of-affairs. Anyone who is or was fashionable used these expressions in daily usage.

Euphemisms include an interesting group of nonsense phrases that serve to voice frustration, disappointment, or anger. For example, those who prefer to avoid the profane may use “gosh darn it” or “heck.”<sup>25</sup>

Some plays or novels are nonsense, for example, absurdist drama or Dadaism, and the literary function of the nonsense is to insult well-respected literature and its cultured consumers. For instance, Alfred Jarry’s (2003/1896) *Ubu Roi ou les polonais* (King Ubu or the Poles) is an anarchic parody of the Victorian style acceptable during Jarry’s time. Jarry uses the following sources for writing *Ubu Roi*: Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Titus Andronicus*, as well as Chabrier’s *Le roi malgre lui* and Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiologie du gout*. Jarry targeted each of these authors in *Ubu Roi*.

Briefly, there are many different (albeit related) uses for nonsense in ordinary language: iconic nonsense is used to exemplify nonsense; Berraisms convey paraphrasable contents via Gricean implicatures; Seussisms convey morals; mnemonic nonsense provides memory aids; fashionable nonsense marks group membership; placeholder nonsense serves as an ordinary language version of propositional variables; and so on. The New Wittgensteinians’ conception of ‘nonsense’ fails to register the diverse uses of nonsense: they see nonsense as iconic nonsense, and as simply unintelligible. Their ‘plain nonsense’ is one kind of nonsense (best exemplified by the iconic class of nonsense I cited above), and it does not exhaust what ordinary people mean by

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<sup>25</sup> However, euphemisms sometimes become taboo words and phrases through a process Stephen Pinker (2003) has termed the ‘euphemism treadmill’. When this occurs, we need to remove them from the nonsense roster.

‘nonsense’. Like games, the different kinds of nonsense are related by a network of similarities. If ‘nonsense’ is a term of ordinary language – as this section has incidentally demonstrated – then it fails to behave as the New Wittgensteinians presume it does.

## 5. Is ‘Nonsense’ a Term of Art?

I have been arguing that what is ordinarily called ‘nonsense’ comes in many functionally distinct varieties. New Wittgensteinians must object that my survey is irrelevant because ‘nonsense,’ as they are using it, is a technical term. In this section, I want to briefly spell out that objection and remind them that one thing we have learned from Wittgenstein is that not all attempts to introduce technical terms are either effective or philosophically legitimate.

New Wittgensteinians write as though – and must adopt the view that – ‘nonsense’ is a technical term, and it means that the words do not have a use. Cora Diamond writes, “*Anything* that is nonsense is so merely because some determination of meaning has *not* been made” (Diamond 1991, 106). If the New Wittgensteinians are to sidestep the many ordinary language uses of the word, they are committed to treating ‘nonsense’ as a technical term.

Wittgenstein repeatedly reminds us that the introduction of a technical term is a philosophically dangerous moment. In his discussion of ‘mental processes’ he says,

How does the philosophical problem about mental processes and states and about behaviourism arise? ... We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them – we think. But that is just what commits

us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.) (PI, 308)

The new technical term ‘mental process’ is by no means innocuous. Consider also Wittgenstein’s treatment of sensation. Russell, Moore, and many other philosophers had introduced one or another variation on the term ‘sense-datum’.<sup>26</sup> (We observe that things can look different than they actually are, so we introduce ‘quale’ or ‘appearance’ or ‘sense-datum’ as a technical term for the way they look.)<sup>27</sup> But Wittgenstein famously teaches us that such terms are illegitimate: this is one of the lessons of the so-called Private Language Argument. A suitably general way of characterizing the difficulty is that there has not been enough setup to underwrite the introduction of the term. Sense-data are supposed to be private experiences, and there are no criteria for ascribing private experiences.

I am not suggesting that Wittgenstein wants to abandon all technical terminology. On the contrary, there are legitimate technical terms. Two cases of Wittgenstein’s own come immediately to mind: ‘language-game’ and ‘form of life.’<sup>28</sup> That there can be legitimate introductions of a technical term is implied by Wittgenstein’s comparison of languages to cities:

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Moore 1924.

<sup>27</sup> Similarly earlier British empiricists used terms such as ‘appearance’, or ‘impression’. For instance, David Hume distinguishes between two kinds of perceptions: ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’. Impressions, of which there are two kinds, reflection and sensation, are generally more forceful and vivacious than ideas. Ideas are distinguished from impressions because they are always causally dependent on impressions (Hume 1999, 1748, 97f, Hume 2000, 1739, 7). One may also refer to John Locke’s discussion of ideas (Locke 1979, 1690, I.1.8 and II.8.8).

<sup>28</sup> Wittgenstein says, “We can think of the whole process of using words in [PI,] (2) as one of those games by means of which children learn their native language. I will call these games ‘language-games’” (PI, 7). We learn the meaning of words by learning how to use them, just as we learn how to play chess by learning how the pieces can be moved around the chessboard (PI, 23). There is a certain amount of training that must go into the word before it can be a legitimate technical term.

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses. (PI, 18)

By the boroughs, he means the specialized idioms of, for example, new technical and bureaucratic disciplines, which constitute the suburbs with straight regular streets and newly developed subdivisions.

Wittgenstein's view is that the introduction of technical terms is legitimate in some cases and illegitimate in others. I will now argue that the New Wittgensteinians introduce the technical term 'nonsense' in an unacceptable way.

The New Wittgensteinians wish to count some phrases or sentences as nonsense, but these repeatedly turn out to have some function or other. They give examples of nonsense, which thereby have the function of being examples. So, they cannot allow just *any* function to remove items from the roster. Their own examples resemble sentences in Seuss stories. This suggests that the Seuss sentences are nonsense, by the New Wittgensteinians' own lights. Seuss stories look to be nonsense at one scale and not at another. Therefore, the New Wittgensteinian criterion looks like it gives equivocal results.

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Similarly, 'form of life' is a technical term of Wittgenstein's. A 'form of life' underscores the interdependence of culture, world-view, and language. For instance, activities like going to the pub for a pint (or two or more) or heading to the coffeehouse for a reading group are cultural activities and forms of social interaction that are all a part of a 'form of life.'

I have noted already that austere or iconic nonsense can have a function. If the New Wittgensteinians do not specify *which* function they mean when they legislate that nonsense is a combination of words that fail to have a function, they have not yet told us what nonsense is.

If they are to resolve this problem, the New Wittgensteinians owe us a distinction between uses that count and uses that do not count as the functions whose absence makes a combination of words into nonsense. The standard label for this is: the semantic/pragmatic distinction. But to adopt this strategy is to forget that Wittgenstein hoped we would cease thinking of the meaning of a sentence as something apart from its use.<sup>29</sup> Wittgenstein writes:

For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (PI, 43)

What Wittgenstein ultimately wishes us to realize is that in many cases (but not all) the meaning of a word amounts to its use, and that the semantic/pragmatic distinction cannot be preserved. So the New Wittgensteinians cannot use that distinction to make good on the obligation to explain which functions of language they have in mind.

## 6. Isn't the New Wittgensteinian Lesson Itself a Piece of Nonsense?

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<sup>29</sup> This is best represented by PI, 116: “What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”

Someone might protest that I have forgotten the New Wittgensteinians' lesson that their own conception of nonsense *is* a piece of nonsense.<sup>30</sup> The New Wittgensteinian contends that Wittgenstein provides directions for reading *him*.<sup>31</sup> Conant suggests that "The only "insight" that [Wittgenstein] imparts, in the end, is one about the reader himself" (Conant 2000, 197). The New Wittgensteinian reply is that we read Wittgenstein to understand ourselves – nothing more and nothing less. This amounts to an accusation that proponents of the metaphysical view (and my view too) have not thrown away the ladder, because they have held onto the notion of ineffable truths.

On the New Wittgensteinian treatment, the activity we are engaged in is "one of showing that we suffer from the illusion of thinking we mean something when we mean nothing" (Conant 1990, 344). James Conant adds:

The reader [of Wittgenstein's work] undergoes an abrupt transition: one moment, imagining he has discovered something, the next, discovering he has not yet discovered anything to mean by the words. The transition is from a psychological experience of entertaining what appears to be a fully determinate thought – *the* thought apparently expressed by *that* sentence – to the experience of having that appearance... disintegrate.<sup>32</sup> (Conant 2002, 423)

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<sup>30</sup> [ACKNOWLEDGEMENT]

<sup>31</sup> The New Wittgensteinians frequently cite TLP, 4.112 ("Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity... A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations."); TLP, Preface ("[This book's] purpose would be achieved if it gave pleasure to one person who read and understood it."); TLP, 6.54 ("My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands *me* eventually recognizes them as nonsensical." [emphasis added]); and PI, 484 ("My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."). For example, see Conant 1990, 343-347.

<sup>32</sup> In a footnote, Conant reiterates what he says here: "The aim of this passage is... to explicate how those passages of the work that succeed in bearing its elucidatory burden are meant to work their medicine on the reader" (Conant

Conant – and the other New Wittgensteinians would agree with Conant – gestures at how the transition of our inner experience works. He suggests that our inner experience should move from imagining one thing to another when we read Wittgenstein’s work.

If the New Wittgensteinian lesson is not an ordinary language treatment of nonsense, then it consists in either the propositional content of some claim or the imaginative recapitulation of the inner experience one has. As we have seen above (and in Section 4), the New Wittgensteinian lesson is not about an ordinary language treatment of nonsense.

If the lesson is about the propositional content of some claim, then the New Wittgensteinians have committed the same error as the metaphysical view, by postulating ineffable truths. But the New Wittgensteinians want us to take up the view that nonsense is neither shown nor said. The lesson cannot be about the propositional content of some claim.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the New Wittgensteinians’ lesson has to consist in the imaginative recapitulation of the inner experience one has.

So, the New Wittgensteinian lesson – and this is confirmed by Conant’s quotation – consists in a gesture at an inner experience one has. The inner experience has to do with the unusual inner effects that come of reading Wittgenstein properly. According to the New Wittgensteinians, those people who have this inner change understand Wittgenstein’s works. But recall Wittgenstein’s objection to the idea of a private language, one containing terms for inner

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2002, 457n135). Also, Conant devotes the most attention to this very point in his article, “Philosophy and Biography” (Conant 2001c, 16-50). He compares writing about Wittgenstein to writing about Socrates. For him, the philosopher’s life is as relevant as the philosopher’s expression of his/her thoughts. Those who try to distinguish Wittgenstein’s life from his philosophy have failed Wittgenstein (the opposite is true when it comes to figures like Russell). Conant writes, “Wittgenstein neither wanted to, nor thought he could, separate the task of becoming the sort of human being he wanted to be from the task of becoming the sort of philosopher he wanted to be” (Conant 2001c, 29).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Conant 1990, 1993, 2000, 2001b, 2002; Conant and Diamond 2004; Diamond 1998, 2000; Read 2006.

experiences that only you can use (PI, 243, 258). The objection to a private language is that gesturing at one's inner experience is not what understanding consists in. Whatever is wrong with a private language is also wrong with the New Wittgensteinian lesson.

Wittgenstein has taught us in the so-called private language argument that you cannot just say, "I mean *that* – my inner experience!" (and presumably, "I mean *that* – your inner experience") and have succeeded in pointing something out. The gesture at the inner effect that the New Wittgensteinians tell us that we should experience on reading the *Tractatus* tries to do exactly that. Thus, we cannot accept the New Wittgensteinian lesson without also thumbing our noses at Wittgenstein.

## 7. Conclusion

Either Wittgenstein's 'nonsense' is a bit of ordinary language or it is a New Wittgensteinian technical term. The New Wittgensteinians are not in a position to treat nonsense as a technical term. If Wittgenstein's 'nonsense' is a bit of ordinary language, then it does not behave the way the New Wittgensteinians say. Therefore, either way, the New Wittgensteinians cannot charitably attribute their view to Wittgenstein.

The main problem is that the New Wittgensteinians have not looked at what we actually say about nonsense and especially at how the word behaves in our language game. When we do, we find that there is nothing common to all nonsense, just like there is nothing common to all games, all numbers, or all language. The properly Wittgensteinian way to proceed is to examine actual usage, to see what we call 'nonsense' and on what occasions. Wittgenstein warns us, "don't think, but look!" (PI: 66) The New Wittgensteinians have not heeded this warning;

instead, they have turned Wittgenstein's conception of nonsense into a bit of metaphysics. To my mind, it is clear enough that they are doing the very thing that Wittgenstein worked so hard to convince us not to do.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> [ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS]

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