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Do Philosophers Talk Nonsense?

by I. Dearden

Antony Fredriksson

Review: Dearden, Ian, *Do Philosophers Talk Nonsense? An inquiry into the possibility of illusions of meaning* (Revised edition). London, Rellet Press: 2013. 136 pp.

In this short book Ian Dearden addresses a question concerning the role of the concept of nonsense in philosophical discourse. On an everyday level, Dearden's discussion is relevant to the practice of philosophy, since we often do meet each other's statements by criticising them as nonsensical. There is something utterly un-philosophical about this gesture. If philosophy is about clarifying the meaning and meaningfulness of our concepts, discarding something as nonsense does not bring light to meaning, it just shuts the door on a discussion that might have proven to lead to unexpected new discoveries. In this sense I think Dearden is on to something important in his investigation. According to Dearden (p. 80), the problem with the idea that somebody can be said to have an *illusion of meaning* – that somebody thinks he says something meaningful, but

actually utters nonsense – is that this accusation always seems to leave the accused as the one with the illusion. The question concerning the philosophical justifications for such an accusation is then something that needs to be clarified.

For Dearden, the question seems to be whether the Wittgensteinian tradition is able to give a feasible account of the criteria for something being nonsense. Dearden invents the concept of “illusion of meaning” (hereafter “IOM”) to signify the position of what he calls “nonsensicalism”, and then he goes on to investigate whether some philosophers in the Wittgensteinian tradition (mainly he targets Norman Malcolm's essay *Dreaming*), fits this description. One obvious problem with Dearden's project is that he invents a category of IOM, then goes on to scrutinize his own invention by comparing this idea to a set of

existing philosophical interpretations of Wittgenstein's concept(s) of nonsense, and then in the end disqualifies the idea of IOM's. At some points this analysis does shed light on some relevant distinctions in the debate concerning nonsense. However, this kind of typological investigation misses the point that Wittgenstein understands language as a form of *communication* (Cf. PI § 2 and 3). Thus nonsense, the role it plays, is primarily to be understood, not in terms of a subject's suffering an illusion concerning his own understanding of meaning, but in terms of failure of communication.

According to the brief historical background given in *Do Philosophers Talk Nonsense?*, it became customary – mainly under the influence of logical positivism – to disqualify certain forms of claims and argumentation as nonsensical. Dearden makes an important distinction as he correctly points out that as Wittgenstein distanced himself from logical positivism, this entailed that he also disqualified the positivist understanding of nonsense, i.e. that nonsense would be propositions that are not verifiable. A quite general Wittgensteinian point about nonsense is that it is a concept that is to be understood in a context of meaning/lack of meaning, which distinguishes the questions concerning nonsense from empirical questions of truth/falsity (the positivist framework).

Dearden continues to show how the realm of meaning/nonsense can be conceived as a sharp distinction.

The proposal – associated with Cora Diamond and others – that the *Tractatus* should be read in the light of a so-called “austere” understanding of nonsense – ascribes to early Wittgenstein such a sharp distinction. It is central to this sort of reading that Wittgenstein thinks one cannot *mean* nonsense. Dearden interprets this austere reading of Wittgenstein as follows: “Something is either or it is not [nonsense]; we have either given it a meaning or we have not; we either mean something by it or we do not” (p. 50). The question here is: How should we interpret Wittgenstein's sharp distinction? Dearden's point is that there is a paradox at play here, that is, if we subscribe to the austere reading of Wittgenstein's philosophy of meaning, that entails that nobody can *mean* nonsense, then we also according to Dearden, have to concede to the fact that we as philosophers cannot use the concept of nonsense in our critique of other philosophers. He writes: “They assume [here Dearden refers to Diamond, Carnap, Hacker and Baker, and Marie McGinn¹] that one can be rigorous about nonsense and still use the concept as a philosophical weapon” (p. 53). What Dearden seems to miss here is that it is one thing to make a logical or grammatical point about nonsense by claiming that “one cannot mean

¹ Carnap and Hacker do not fit into Dearden's characterisation here at all, since they are not proponents of the austere conception of nonsense.

nonsense”, and a very different thing to claim that “something is either or it is not [nonsense]; we have either given it a meaning or we have not”. If we adhere to Wittgenstein’s grammatical point that we cannot mean nonsense, we also have to understand its counterpart: that we cannot *mean* meaning. Meaning is not established by some act of the will, neither is it impaired by the lack of some willing act. For Wittgenstein meaning is established in the use(s) of language (Cf. PI § 1), that entails intersubjectivity, dialogue, reciprocity, a history etc. Due to the lack of this dimension in Dearden’s inquiry, it falls short by necessity.

The wrong understanding of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, according to Dearden, would be to read it as a guide book on how to speak meaningfully. And on this point I wholeheartedly agree with him. This is not what Wittgenstein intended. On the contrary, his philosophy disregards all models that require any kind of accompaniment to language, as a basis for meaning. And this entails that we cannot refer to any statement as meaningless by referring to something metaphysical: images in the mind, intentions, etc., that would somehow stand behind our concepts as guarantors of meaning. But Dearden himself seems to be unclear concerning on what side of the fence he stands in this discussion, since he often falls into an essentialist understanding of the concept of nonsense, or at least fails to take the discussion beyond this essentialist framework, since he is constricted by his own

conceptual invention of nonsense as illusions of meaning occurring within singular subjects.

Dearden touches briefly upon (p. 42) Peter Winch’s work in *Trying to Make Sense*. I think that a more thorough reading of Winch would have opened up a deeper understanding of how to bring the discussion on sense and nonsense further toward a direction that does not give philosophers any mandate to define the criteria for sense and nonsense.

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