DO PHILOSOPHERS TALK NONSENSE?

An Inquiry into the Possibility of Illusions of Meaning.

by Ian Dearden.

I intend to include what follows in a future edition of the book. In the meantime I would be grateful for comments on its general intelligibility. Since its readers will probably not have immediate access to the book, they will not be able to turn to the relevant pages to clarify anything they find obscure. I have therefore tried always to avoid being cryptic or dogmatic and to give at least *some* indication of my arguments for any given thesis. I do not know how successful I have been. Fortunately most philosophical arguments can be summarised reasonably briefly. It is the guarding against possible misunderstandings and the consideration of likely counter-arguments that makes them long. But I ask readers to remember that they will need to consult the book to gain a full understanding of my position.

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Chapter One: A New Kind of Error.

9. Much philosophy during the past hundred years has consisted in accusations of talking nonsense. The practice deserves a name: I call it 'nonsensicalism'. What is being alleged is that the accused believes there is something he means by what he says but is mistaken in this belief. This supposed error I call an 'illusion of meaning' (IOM). It is unclear whether the non-philosopher recognises the possibility of IOMs. People often produce obscure or defective sentences but they are not usually suspected of meaning nothing by them and rarely if ever of thinking there is something they mean when there isn't.

9-10. There are some analogies between the problem of whether there can be IOMs and that of whether there can be unconscious mental states, most obviously in that both are concerned with the extent to which a person is the final authority on the contents of his own mind. It is puzzling therefore that the latter has received vastly more attention than the former.

10-11. In particular nonsensicalists themselves never seem to entertain even the slightest of doubts that they are on the right track.

11-12. Accusations of talking nonsense are probably not as common today as they were in the middle decades of the last century but they are still made – by

Wittgensteinians especially. And they have not so far been shown to be illegitimate. Logical positivism and the philosophy of the early Wittgenstein may no longer be live options but it is possible that the diagnoses of philosophical nonsense in the later Wittgenstein are justifiable. Unfortunately those accused of talking nonsense rarely seem to defend themselves by questioning the whole basis of such accusations. Scrutiny of the credentials of nonsensicalism is long overdue.

12-13. There are no doubt philosophers who think that other philosophers sometimes talk nonsense but without suggesting, as some do, that philosophy as a whole is mostly nonsense. They do not reject the very problems of philosophy as nonsensical pseudo-problems. Colin McGinn is an example.

13-15. There are probably also philosophers who think that nonsensicalism is pretty well defunct and have not seriously confronted the work of the later Wittgenstein. And I suspect that there are philosophers, even analytical ones, whose training has not made them particularly aware of the nonsensicalist standpoint. All these need to consider carefully whether there could be anything in nonsensicalism.

15-16. In fact no philosopher of any sort can afford to neglect the issue. It would not be completely devoid of interest and importance, even if philosophers had never used the concept of nonsense polemically. It concerns the relationship between thought and language and the question: Why does language matter to philosophy? (Hacking) Moreover, if IOMs are possible, they might occur outside philosophy, which would give them additional importance. But the crucial point is that if a putative philosophical thesis really is nonsensical, then any attack on it that treats it as meaningful but false will be as misguided as the thesis itself. Similarly, any attempt to tackle a meaningless pseudo-problem as though it were meaningful will be equally wrongheaded. We need to know whether we should be prepared to encounter IOMs.

Chapter Two: Nonsensicalism in Action – Malcolm on Dreaming.

18. Norman Malcolm condemns as nonsensical a view of dreaming that is virtually universal among philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Everyone can thus come to appreciate what it is like to be accused of talking nonsense by a philosopher. The view in question is that dreaming is an experience during sleep that occupies a substretch of the time spent sleeping and which is remembered, not necessarily accurately, upon waking. In evaluating Malcolm's argument one finds that he seems to understand perfectly well – to ascribe meaning to – the very view he claims is nonsensical. Indeed he has to understand it to make his criticisms.

18-19. Malcolm's main theses are:
a) One cannot assert or even judge that one is asleep since it is impossible to verify that any mental activity is occurring during sleep and hence the assertion that there is, or anything that implies that there is, is nonsensical.
b) If it is countered that surely one *dreams* during sleep, Malcolm replies that to have dreamed that such-and-such happened is just to have awoken seeming to remember that it happened, when it never did. The verificationist considerations in (a) show that there is no sense in the supposition that one might have experienced its happening or seeming to happen when one was asleep.

c) ‘I am dreaming’ is meaningless, just like ‘I am asleep’, since it would entail ‘I am asleep’. So there is no problem of dream-scepticism, since the very suggestion that one might be dreaming though one thinks one is awake is nonsensical.

19. We are not here concerned with whether Malcolm is right to maintain that certain claims are unverifiable but with whether, if they are unverifiable, he is right to maintain that they are therefore nonsensical.

20-22. Malcolm relies almost exclusively upon verificationist arguments. Sometimes the verificationist demand is applied directly to a claim, sometimes to the question whether someone understands that claim. Sometimes it is formulated using Wittgenstein’s term ‘criterion’: if there is no criterion for the truth of a claim about a mental occurrence, then that claim is meaningless. Even when on occasion he uses an argument that is not verificationist, he falls back on verificationism to counter a possible reply to it.

22-23. It seems that Malcolm has pointed to genuine, though probably not insuperable, difficulties in verifying that someone engaged in mental activity during sleep. But the problem is whether, even if he had been able to show that no one could possibly have any evidence whatsoever that mental activity was occurring during sleep, this would license his conclusion that it was *meaningless* to suggest it was. He seems to have to understand the putative possibility under discussion even to raise the question of whether one could verify the claim that that possibility was realised.

23-25. Malcolm talks as though nonsense could enter into logical relations, as though it could entail or be entailed by other pieces of nonsense. Sometimes he talks of what something would entail *if it made sense*. Even if Malcolm could reformulate his arguments to avoid these absurdities, it would still be significant that he makes the mistakes he does: what he officially regards as nonsense still *seems* meaningful to him.

25. Malcolm is quite explicit that what he calls ‘nonsense’ is ‘unintelligible’, ‘senseless’, ‘without meaning’; so it is not pedantic or excessively literal-minded to object that he cannot consistently use arguments that depend on the meaningfulness of the supposed nonsense or treat it as having logical properties.

25-28. It is also clear that Malcolm is accusing those he believes talk nonsense about dreaming of suffering from IOMs. They are not merely using words like ‘dream’ and ‘sleep’ in a way that the grammar of the language does not allow (if indeed they are). They are making the much more radical error of not meaning anything by their words in spite of sincerely believing that they do mean something. It is not obvious precisely what Malcolm does think about the acceptability of sentences like ‘I am asleep’ and ‘I am dreaming’ when judged purely in terms of English grammar and usage.

28-30. One can accept for the sake of argument an assumption one believes to be false, but Malcolm writes as though he thinks he can accept for the sake of argument a putative assumption that he believes is nonsensical. This is evident in his discussion of the coherence principle as an answer to dream-scepticism. The principle states that one can tell whether one is dreaming or not by noting whether one’s present

experience coheres with one's past experience. He objects that one might *dream* that one's present experience coheres with one's past. This is a good point but it is not available to Malcolm, given his view that it is nonsense to suggest that one might at present be dreaming. Perhaps there is some way a nonsensicalist can empathise with those he believes talk nonsense but it cannot be by adopting their supposedly nonsensical assumptions.

30. One can unwittingly make a false assumption and this assumption can be deeply buried, so that it takes argument to show that it is being made. Some of the things Malcolm says suggest that he thinks it is possible to make *nonsensical* assumptions unwittingly. But as it is not entirely clear that he does think this, the point will not be pressed.

30-31. Evidently Malcolm has not fully realised how different polemic involving accusations of talking nonsense is going to have to be from polemic involving accusations of falsity. Perhaps with greater rigour and more careful choice of words he could have circumvented these difficulties. But perhaps they reveal underlying problems with nonsensicalism.

31-33. It might be suggested that it is the *verificationist* form that Malcolm's nonsensicalism takes that is the source of the trouble. No matter how difficult it might be to verify that someone is having an experience during sleep, it is far from obvious that this makes the very suggestion meaningless, so perhaps nonsensicalist accusations, if they are to be made at all, should be made on other grounds. And the same might be said of Malcolm's verificationist use of the term 'criterion' (whether or not this would have been countenanced by Wittgenstein). But even if it is verificationism rather than nonsensicalism in general that is suspect, the matter is not just of historical interest. Peter Hacker has more recently argued that one cannot fail to notice features of one's own mental images and he does so by using the term 'criterion' verificationistically.

33. Can one ever dismiss a claim as meaningless because it is unverifiable? Or is it unverifiable because of what it means?

Chapter Three: Talking Nonsense and Talking about Nonsense.

34. We can learn from Malcolm's difficulties what sorts of problem are likely to confront nonsensicalists in general.

34-35. Any nonsensicalist will have to take care when specifying what it is he is rejecting as nonsense. Russell's Theory of Types illustrates the problem. If we say that 'The class of all men is a man' is nonsense, what are we saying? If we are talking just about sounds or marks on paper, then, as Anthony Kenny points out, we are stating only a contingent fact about the English language, since there is nothing about any sequence of sounds or marks that precludes its being given a meaning. Yet, as he goes on to point out, we cannot say that it is nonsense when it has the meaning it has in English, since, if it is nonsense, it does not have any meaning in English. There are difficulties too with saying that the sentence is nonsense when the component parts of it have the meaning they have in English. (Cf. pp. 49-56.) The early Wittgenstein

was driven to take extreme measures to deal with this sort of problem. And the later Wittgenstein warned against seeming to say of nonsense that it is 'its sense that is senseless'.

35-36. But why are philosophers interested in announcing that something is nonsense? Because they believe it has been taken for sense. So they must give some account of those they believe talk nonsense or think they understand what is in fact nonsense. They must somehow specify what has gone wrong but without seeming to say what the dupe means or understands by the nonsense. This, the Problem of Specifying the Nonsense, is not trivial.

36-37. The problem concerns what the nonsensicalist is claiming to have already identified as nonsense. But how does he know that those he accuses of talking nonsense are victims of IOMs? One might not understand what someone says or one might be able to show that what someone says is not an acceptable sentence of the language (or both). But in neither case does it follow that he means nothing by what he says, still less that he means nothing in spite of thinking that he does mean something. When one criticises what someone says, one normally does so on the basis of what one thinks he means. One cannot do that here. What can one do? This I call 'the Problem of Diagnosis'.

37-38. This problem is moderately familiar in connexion with logical positivism. It has been pointed out that, as we saw with Malcolm, one has to understand a claim, ascribe a meaning to it, in order to set about assessing it for verifiability. (Some positivists, such as A J. Ayer, responded by saying that the Verification Principle was only a test for 'factual' or 'cognitive' meaning.) But I do not know of any general statement of the problem as one that potentially confronts all nonsensicalists.

38. One can refute a claim by inferring from it something that is known to be false, but not by inferring from it something that is known to be nonsense. (Equivocation with the word 'absurd' when considering *Reductio ad Absurdum* may have been a source of obfuscation here.) Nor is it helpful to talk, as Malcolm does, of what something would entail *if it made sense*. What it would entail would depend on what sense it made. Thus one method of argument that is available when truth and falsity are in question is not available when it is a matter of sense versus nonsense.

38-39. There is another problem about inference: the nonsensicalist owes us an account of what is going on when someone thinks he is inferring '*p*' from '*q*' and either '*p*' or '*q*' (or both) is nonsense according to the nonsensicalist.

39-40. There are several further snares the nonsensicalist must avoid:
a) One cannot, as Malcolm seems to think, make nonsensical assumptions for the sake of argument.
b) Nor can one accuse others of making nonsensical assumptions. Descartes and the British empiricists are often accused of presupposing the possibility of a private language. This accusation cannot be combined, as it sometimes is, with the claim that talk of a private language is nonsensical.
c) One can distinguish different interpretations of a thesis and claim that some make it true and some make it false; but not that some make it meaningful and some make it meaningless.

40-41. Nonsense is not an especially horrendous falsehood; not sense that is somehow of an inferior kind; not something that can be meant or understood. When nonsensicalists talk of nonsense as if they were talking of sense, we must ask whether this is mere carelessness or something that reveals difficulties in principle with nonsensicalism. Philosophers have been traditionally concerned with truth versus falsity. If this opposition is to be replaced by that between sense and nonsense, the change will bring with it new obligations that may be more onerous than has yet been generally realised.

Chapter Four: Are Philosophers Who Make Accusations of Talking Nonsense Really Postulating IOMs?

42. It might be wondered whether the difficulties I believe confront nonsensicalists only do so because I am attributing to them an excessively strict conception of nonsense. There is no question of proving that *all* nonsensicalists work with my conception of nonsense but in this chapter I suggest that anyone who is serious in making philosophical accusations of talking nonsense is committed to the possibility of IOMs.

42-44. What is it to be the victim of an IOM? Five points need to be borne in mind:
a) Colloquially 'nonsense' is used to refer to what is thought to be manifestly false. Someone talking nonsense in this sense *means something*. The colloquial sense ought to be and generally is avoided in philosophical writing.
b) The producer of philosophical nonsense must genuinely believe he means something. He must not be deliberately spouting gibberish.
c) One who accuses another of producing philosophical nonsense does not just mean that he does not understand him.
d) It is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for producing philosophical nonsense that the words uttered should not constitute an acceptable sentence of the language:

(i) It is obviously not a sufficient condition, since people are producing defective sentences all the time without thereby ceasing to mean anything.

(ii) According to the later Wittgenstein at least, it is not a necessary condition, since a perfectly acceptable sentence can be nonsense if it is uttered in totally unsuitable circumstances.

e) The producer of philosophical nonsense must believe that he himself means something by the locution uttered, not just that it has meaning. One can easily be led to believe falsely that a combination of words, even words of one's own language, has a meaning without thereby coming to seem to see a meaning in it oneself.

44-45. It should also be noted that the nonsensicalist is postulating illusions of understanding as well as of meaning. Someone who is taken in by philosophical nonsense uttered by another person must think he understands something by a combination of words when he understands nothing by it. He must not just *mis*understand it, i.e. think it means such-and-such when it means something else.

46-48. The careful setting out of what philosophical nonsense will have to involve ought in itself to raise some doubts. It is surely not just *obvious* that we are dealing

with a genuine possibility. But some might claim that it *is* obvious that if someone said certain things, he would be talking nonsense. An example is 'What time is it on the sun?' We can perhaps agree that there is something wrong with this question or 'question'. But it is surely not obvious that what is wrong with it is that it is meaningless. And if we try to imagine why someone might come out with it, it is even less obvious that we would have a case of someone's thinking he meant something when in fact he meant nothing.

48-49. It has so far been assumed that one cannot mean a nonsense. This assumption needs to be examined. 'What you mean is nonsense, i.e. meaningless' sounds self-contradictory, like 'the sense that is senseless'. But is it? Wittgenstein would surely not have allowed the possibility of meaning a nonsense: in the *Tractatus* he denied that one could *judge* a nonsense. And indeed there is good reason not to allow the possibility. If one could mean a nonsense, then some group of speakers could mean the same nonsensical thing by the same combination of sounds or marks, so that the combination would acquire a meaningless meaning or senseless sense. The distinction between sense and nonsense would have been obliterated.

49-50. Wittgenstein's conception seems in fact to be very strict or 'austere'. Philosophical nonsense has no more meaning than 'Ab sur ah'. The fact that the former affects us in ways that the latter does not, by puzzling us for example, does not make it meaningful.

50-52. Cora Diamond, James Conant and others have developed this 'austere' conception of nonsense. There is on their view only 'negative' nonsense, nonsense that arises from a failure to give meaning to signs. There is no 'positive' nonsense, nonsense arising from the interaction of meanings that signs have been given.

52-53. I suggest that it is possible that some philosophers have accepted nonsensicalism rather too easily, because they have not thought through what it involves. But it is also not clear that even the 'austere' theorists have fully realised the difficulties that confront nonsensicalism when one is serious about one's talk of nonsense.

53-56. I endorse the interpretation of Wittgenstein as taking an 'austere' view of nonsense, but with the reservation that his tendency to call rules of grammar 'nonsense' when they are misconstrued as metaphysical truths is not easily reconciled with it. The latter error, if it is possible at all, would seem to be an error about *what* one means or is talking about, rather than about *whether* one means anything.

56-57. Suppose the concepts of meaning and meaningfulness turn out to be vague ones, so that there is not always a definite answer to the question whether a sentence or utterance is meaningful. In so far as a philosophical question or thesis is affected by such vagueness, this will work to the disadvantage of the nonsensicalist, since one might as well treat it as meaningful and avoid all the difficulties about how one is to talk about what is supposed to be nonsense without falling into the trap of ascribing a sense to it.

57-59. Some philosophers have suggested that what other philosophers call 'nonsense' is better described as false. While this, the 'falsidal' view, certainly

constitutes a genuine challenge to nonsensicalism, it suffers from two drawbacks. First, there is a marked tendency (also found in many nonsensicalists) to concentrate upon combinations of words and to neglect the question of how anyone might come to utter them. Second, it involves a certain artificiality: the proposals for assigning truth-values to the combinations under discussion also assign them to such locutions as 'Quadruplicity drinks procrastination', which few would previously have thought meaningful.

Chapter Five: The Elusiveness of Philosophical Nonsense.

60-62. What is condemned as philosophical nonsense has a certain 'staying power'. For example, a philosopher who comes to the conclusion that scepticism is nonsense does not find that it ceases even to *seem* meaningful. Rather he believes he has theoretical grounds for dismissing the appearance of meaningfulness as illusory. IOMs, therefore, if they are possible will be like the standard perceptual illusions where the false appearance persists even when one knows the facts. (A disanalogy will be considered on pp.78-79.) But perceptual illusions can be shown to be such. It is not yet clear whether the nonsensicalist has a way of showing that an appearance of meaningfulness is illusory. Wittgenstein appears to recognise this 'staying power' of philosophical nonsense but he does not clearly distinguish it from a kind of emotional attachment to the supposed nonsense, which may sometimes be present but need not.

62-63. There are no uncontroversial examples of philosophical nonsense. The point has both a trivial and a deeper interpretation. Clearly, if there has ever been such a thing as philosophical nonsense, someone must at some time have made a mistake: he must, however briefly, have been taken in. But we all make arithmetical mistakes and yet there are uncontroversial examples of arithmetical mistakes. There is no equivalent to this with philosophical nonsense. The nonsensicalist might argue that the absence of uncontroversial examples of philosophical nonsense is due to the relative novelty of the nonsensicalist approach. To which one can only reply, 'Perhaps but perhaps not'.

64. One can be certain that someone has made an arithmetical error without knowing how and why he came to make it. One could first establish the error before going on to try to explain it. But one could not know that someone was uttering philosophical nonsense in advance of having any explanation of his doing so. There are no uncontroversial examples of philosophical nonsense, one might say, because philosophical nonsense is not directly *exhibitable*.

64-65. These points do not show that nonsensicalism is indefensible but they do raise doubts about it. Perhaps the 'staying power' of alleged philosophical nonsense is to be explained by the fact that it is not nonsense at all. Perhaps the absence of uncontroversial, exhibitable, examples of philosophical nonsense is due to there being no *genuine* examples of it. On the other hand, if the difficulties facing nonsensicalism are recognised and a serious attempt is made to meet them, then perhaps nonsensicalism will be the winner and we will one day know which of the many accusations of producing philosophical nonsense can be justified.

Chapter Six: IOMs Outside Philosophy.

66. If IOMs are possible, there is no reason to assume that they will be confined to philosophy. It might even turn out that there is a better case for claiming to find them outside philosophy than within it.

66-69. Consider first this question: Dreams can be utterly bizarre, but can one have *nonsensical* dreams? Norman Malcolm touches on the question but it is not easy to tell what his answer is nor, for that matter, what it should be given his own radical view of dreaming. Malcolm aside, there are several possibilities. Perhaps there can be nonsensical dreams. This is open to the objection that if one says, 'I dreamed that …' and follows this with a meaningless string of words, one has failed to specify what one dreamed. So perhaps seemingly senseless dreams somehow involve IOMs. Clearly we need to know whether IOMs are possible before we can assess this suggestion. Or perhaps what seem to be nonsensical dreams have just been badly reported: if one were to describe them carefully and accurately, one would produce a narrative that was at least meaningful.

69-70. Suppose someone has a paper accepted by a learned journal and then announces that it was, and was intended to be, sheer nonsense. What might have been going on in the minds of editors and referees? Setting aside the possibility of mere irresponsibility on their part, there seem to be two possibilities. Perhaps they only thought they saw a meaning in the text. Of course, IOMs will have to be possible for this to be the explanation. Or perhaps they genuinely did see a meaning in the text, even though none was intended. This seems possible but extremely improbable. There is a further difficulty that both explanations must face. The meanings, real or imagined, of the sentences must have cohered or appeared to cohere. It is surely not sufficient that each individual sentence should have conveyed or seemed to convey a meaning. So is the sort of hoax I am imagining a real possibility? (Readers will no doubt be reminded of the Sokal hoax. But Sokal specifically says that he only included a few intentionally meaningless locutions in his paper.)

71-73. The utterances of schizophrenics, their so-called 'word-salads', often seem utterly unintelligible, the rules of the language being disregarded to an extent not found in those in a normal state of mind. Perhaps they only think they mean something by their words. It is not clear whether the ordinary person regards schizophrenic utterances thus. Perhaps some psychiatrists do but others, such as R. D. Laing, have maintained that they can be understood if one makes the effort. (They usually assume that understanding their utterances would shed light on their condition but this may not be so: schizophrenics don't have to be talking about their own psychological condition or its causes.) The mere fact that a case can be made for the view that schizophrenic 'word-salads' mean something shows that one cannot simply treat them as empirical evidence for the possibility of IOMs.

73-75. Those under the influence of drugs sometimes have what seem to them to be profound insights, which they write down only to find when they come round that what they wrote is gibberish. This is perhaps the nearest thing encountered so far to empirical evidence for IOMs. But even here an alternative explanation can be given: perhaps they did mean something by what they wrote (which may or may not have

been particularly insightful) and have simply forgotten what it was they meant. It has to be admitted though that this account seems somewhat contrived.

75. The main conclusion to be drawn from considering the above cases is that one cannot simply cite them as empirical evidence for the possibility of IOMs. One must decide whether IOMs are possible before one can be sure that these cases exemplify them. If they are not possible, other explanations of these cases, however contrived they might seem, will have to be found.

75-77. Another conclusion to be drawn is that philosophical nonsense, if it exists, will have to be a much better imitation of sense than is the nonsense, if such it is, encountered in the above cases. It has to take in people who are intelligent, alert and fully *compos mentis*. It has to have 'staying power'. (Contrast the drugs case.) It has to be or at least seem communicable: the IOMs in question must in fact be widely shared. (Contrast the case of schizophrenia.) Finally there has to be an illusion of logical coherence, which is rare or absent in the sorts of case discussed above.

Chapter Seven: How, If At All, Might IOMs Be Possible?

78-79. IOMs must be illusions without content. When someone experiences a perceptual illusion, one can say what it is that he thinks he perceives. But if someone were to think he meant *something* when in fact he meant *nothing*, one could not – at least in any straightforward sense – say what it was the thought he meant. This brings out just what a radical error an IOM would have to be, perhaps the most radical error it is possible to make. One thought one had a thesis or question and yet in reality there was just nothing there. If one philosopher really were to prove the utterances of another philosopher to be philosophical nonsense, to say he had *refuted* him would be a gross understatement.

79-81. Might it be possible to use the mind-boggling radicalness of the error the nonsensicalist is postulating to produce a refutation *of nonsensicalism*? Probably not. Although an IOM must be an illusion without a content, it seems a possibility that someone might be deceived into thinking he means something when he means nothing by other thoughts, ones that do have a content. But at least the onus is now on the nonsensicalist to tell us about these deceptive thoughts. The problem can be graphically illustrated by considering an argument of Kenny's derived from *On Certainty*: Descartes should have asked whether his malicious demon could so work on his mind as to make him think there was something he meant and understood by his words when there wasn't. Would such a feat be within the demon's power?

81-82. In daily life we seem to accept the possibility of such puzzling mental aberrations as weakness of will and self-deception. Yet philosophers debate how, or even whether, they are possible. By contrast, the notion of IOMs has provoked no similar debate – even though it is not clear that the non-philosopher employs it. (Cf. pp.9-10) Ought not what might turn out to be no more than a philosophers' invention to be subject to even more careful scrutiny?

82-83. There seem to be suggestions in the literature as to how IOMs might be possible – perhaps about ten. My discussion is constrained by several factors:

a) There may be suggestions I have missed;
b) I am not always sure that what I treat as a suggestion as to how IOMs might be possible is really being offered as such;
c) Some of them I have been unable to put into a form that leaves no doubt about their relevance to the problem;
d) A full discussion would require that I consider the possibility of combining them, which is likely to be a huge undertaking.

83-84. The first suggestion, like the next, is loosely based on remarks of Wittgenstein, Rudolf Carnap and Peter Geach. Perhaps someone can wrongly think that he means something by a locution because of some emotion that it evokes. (This suggestion must be distinguished from the claim that an utterance can have emotive meaning without having factual meaning, which at least grants it a kind of meaning.) There is a problem about the objects of the deceptive emotions. One might perhaps maintain that someone wrongly thinks he means something by 'God created the Universe' because he is misled by an emotion – of awe, say – directed towards the Universe. But this sort of move will only take care of a few rather simple examples of putative propositions. What of utterances that seem to express more complex propositions? One could hardly explain the illusion of seeming to see a meaning in '*p*' by appealing to an emotion whose propositional object was: *p*. Could one appeal to an emotion whose propositional object one regarded as unproblematically meaningful? Perhaps, but has any serious attempt ever been made to work out the details of such an account?

84-85. Wittgenstein often claims that we are misled into wrongly thinking there is something we mean because we are influenced by pictures. Let us assume that by 'pictures' he means mental imagery that accompanies our utterances. This suggestion seems better placed than the last to explain the illusion of a complex meaning, since mental imagery can have considerable complexity. But there is a difficulty. How must the imagery be related to the locution uttered in order to mislead someone into thinking he means something by it? Surely not just any imagery will do. But nonsensicalists must avoid making it look as though the victim of an IOM associates a certain image with a locution because of what he *means* or *understands* by that locution. It is after all nonsense he is supposed to be talking. This suggestion too leaves us with much unfinished business.

85-86. Wittgenstein and others often claim that we are led to seem to see meaning in meaningless locutions by deceptive grammatical analogies. (The ideas of language-game confusion and category mistakes are closely related to this suggestion.) The problem here is that it is not clear that, as it stands, this is really an explanation of IOMs. Suppose we are told that someone wrongly sees a meaning in a certain locution because it has a superficial grammatical resemblance to locutions which really do make sense. One must distinguish between thinking a locution has a meaning and thinking one means something by it oneself. It seems that the misleading grammatical analogy account can explain why someone might expect a locution which is in fact meaningless to have a meaning, but suppose he also thinks he sees a meaning in it himself. How is that to be explained? The account requires supplementation, perhaps by one of the other suggestions considered in this chapter.

86-88. Two other suggestions from the later Wittgenstein raise the same difficulty as that just considered. The first is that philosophers think that if a word or phrase is taken from a verbal context in which it has a meaning and inserted into a new verbal context, it will retain its meaning 'like an atmosphere'. The other is that philosophers think that whole sentences can be taken from contexts of utterance in which they are meaningful and used in entirely new contexts without loss of meaning. Suppose philosophers do think these things and suppose they are wrong to do so. It is not clear that we have been given an explanation of how philosophers come to think that there is something that *they themselves* mean or understand by the nonsense that is supposedly generated in these ways.

88-89. Perhaps Wittgenstein's references to 'pictures' should be taken as references to metaphors, without any necessary involvement of mental imagery. Might it be, for example, that philosophers are misled by metaphors like 'at the back of one's mind' into wrongly treating the mind as somehow spatial? The trouble with this suggestion is that, if it is supposed to explain the production of philosophical nonsense as distinct from some other kind of error, these philosophers must be the victims of IOMs. Presumably they must seem to see an illusory literal sense in 'at the back of one's mind' in addition to or instead of the metaphorical one. But is it any easier to explain how this is possible – seeming to see a *literal* sense that is not there – than it is to explain the possibility of IOMs in general?

89-90. A better idea might be that philosophers sometimes think they are saying something metaphorically which they could express literally if necessary, when in fact, if they were to try to do so, they would fail. But can one be sure that all meaningful metaphorical utterances can be replaced by literal ones? Perhaps ordinary language contains irreducibly metaphorical expressions and if we were to reject the irreducibly metaphorical as nonsense, we would find ourselves committed to rejecting more than we wanted to, much of our talk about the mental for example.

90-91. Wittgenstein no doubt believes that misconceptions about how language works can be at least partial explanations of how philosophers come to talk nonsense. He may however be open to an *ad hominem* objection. It is likely that he thinks that philosophers' mistaken views about the nature of language are not just false but nonsensical. There is thus a danger of circularity: appealing to nonsensicalist theses in order to justify nonsensicalism.

91-93. Wittgenstein sees a close connexion between meaning and use. Might IOMs be helpfully seen as illusions of use? Louis Sass has drawn attention to the many passages where Wittgenstein emphasises that philosophical utterances do not achieve anything: they are idle, useless, futile. He, Wittgenstein, deploys a whole range of metaphors, similes and analogies to this end. But it is not easy to extract from his remarks about use and the lack of it a suggestion about how IOMs might be possible, particularly if one is careful to avoid the question-begging assumption that philosophical uses of words are not genuine uses. One problem is that normally when one dismisses an utterance as idle or futile one does so on the basis of what one thinks it means. Philosophical nonsense cannot be like this. If anything is to be made of the illusion-of-use suggestion, one will have to find one or more enterprises in which a speaker can unwittingly fail and where one can conclude from this failure that he has unwittingly failed to mean anything by his words.

93-95. Are there any more suggestions for explaining IOMs? There are other passages in the later Wittgenstein where he certainly seems to be focusing carefully on the psychology of those he thinks are taken in by nonsense. But they do not seem to me to have anything to offer to anyone who is not already persuaded of the possibility of IOMs. Their concern with the phenomenology of philosophical error does not go deep enough.

95-96. If this review of suggested explanations of how IOMs might be possible is broadly accurate, we can draw three conclusions. Most of the suggestions come from the later Wittgenstein; none of them has been developed in enough detail for it to be clear that they really do show the possibility of IOMs; and they have been made in isolation from, rather than brought into relation with, each other. Why, one must ask, does the case for the fundamental presupposition of nonsensicalism exist in such a rudimentary form? Indeed it is not inconceivable that what I have treated as suggested explanations of how IOMs might be possible are not that at all but just factors that encourage or facilitate IOMs, the possibility of which is not being seriously questioned. The next chapter offers a possible reason why the later Wittgenstein did not develop his explanations further than he did.

Chapter Eight: The No Introspectible (Phenomenological, Experiential) Difference Account.

97. Many passages can be cited in which the later Wittgenstein denies that meaning something by an utterance consists in any experience, activity, state or process concurrent with that utterance, though he does not deny that when one speaks meaningfully one typically does have experiences – of mental imagery, for example. But they are neither necessary nor sufficient for one's speech to be meaningful.

98-99. Perhaps this alone is enough to show how there can be IOMs, to create the logical space for them. Anything that goes on when one speaks meaningfully could also go on when one speaks without meaning anything. There need be no introspectible difference between the two cases and therefore a person is not necessarily the final authority on whether he means anything by his words. The suggestions considered in the previous chapter may help to explain individual instances of philosophical nonsense but the overarching explanation is that nothing introspectible is a necessary or sufficient condition for meaningful speech. This is arguably a more Wittgensteinian account of the possibility of IOMs than anything considered so far.

99-102. But it is not an *interpretation* of the later Wittgenstein so much as an attempt to apply some of the things he says to the question of whether there can be IOMs. Perhaps if he had been directly challenged to tell us why we should believe in the possibility of IOMs, he would have said something like this. Considered as an interpretation, it would face several problems:
a) Why does he never formulate the account explicitly?
b) Why does he say as much as he does about the individual sources of philosophical illusion if he has a general account that seems to make this unnecessary? (The problem is the inverse of that with which the previous chapter concluded.)

c) It is also worth asking whether the *early* Wittgenstein have been able to say anything along these lines to justify his nonsensicalism?

102-104. The account is based on the later Wittgenstein's views as to *what meaning is not*. Now it is likely that he would have rejected accounts of meaning that do see it as some kind of introspectible entity not just as false, but as nonsensical. This creates an obvious threat of circularity. (Cf. pp.90-91.) Nevertheless it would be unwise to reject the account on this ground alone. Perhaps a correct view of meaning can show how there is room for IOMs, whatever the status of *incorrect* views – whether false or nonsensical – might be.

104-105. There is in fact a far more straightforward and pressing problem with this account. If what determines whether someone means anything by his words is not some introspectible accompaniment to them, what does determine it? There is a danger that IOMs will turn out to be so like genuine cases of meaning and understanding that there is no obvious reason to distinguish them. For example, Wittgenstein allows that mental imagery often accompanies meaningful speech but he also thinks that it can mislead, or help to mislead, us into thinking there is something we mean when there isn't. When, one might ask, is it harmless and when is it misleading? If a speaker is not to be treated as the final authority on whether he means anything, there must be reasons for rejecting his sincere claim to do so.

Chapter Nine: What Grounds Could One Have For Overruling Someone's Sincere Claims To Speak Meaningfully?

106-107. In Chapter Seven the suggestion that IOMs can be induced by misleading grammatical analogies was examined and found to be inadequate, at least on its own. It might however be more successful in helping the nonsensicalist deal with the problem introduced in Chapter Three, that of Specifying the Nonsense. When he rejects something as nonsense, how is he to make clear what he is talking about, given that nonsense is nonsense and not a substandard specimen of sense? Suppose he wants to reject as nonsense a theory that identifies X with Y. He compares 'X is identical with Y' with identity statements involving X or Y which he believes are in fact meaningful, and claims that none are genuinely analogous but that the theorist has failed to realise this and this has misled him, or helped to mislead him, into thinking there is something that he means. This may perhaps succeed as a means of specifying the nonsense he is rejecting in a way that goes beyond recording the wholly contingent fact (supposing it to be a fact) that 'X is identical with Y' is not an acceptable sentence of English – while at the same time avoiding self-defeatingly ascribing a meaning to it. There is a sense in which a nonsensicalist is claiming to understand those he accuses of talking nonsense better than they understand themselves. This account is perhaps the best that can be done by way of justifying that claim.

107-108. Clearly, if these contortions are to be preferable to simply allowing that the theorist has meaningfully, though perhaps falsely, identified X with Y, the nonsensicalist must have very good reasons for claiming that the theorist is talking nonsense. Which returns us to the question that arose at the end of the last chapter:

What reasons could anyone have for rejecting someone's claim, however sincere, to be speaking meaningfully?

108-109. Edward Witherspoon suggests that the Wittgensteinian nonsensicalist will invite those he suspects of talking nonsense to explain their utterances and that under cross-examination they will reveal that they do not mean anything by their words and perhaps come to realise this themselves. But, taken as instructions for diagnosing philosophical nonsense, this is surely far too vague. What approaches are available to someone hoping to make such a diagnosis?

109. Might there be a criterion or criteria of meaningfulness? Our discussion of verificationism, positivist or Malcolmian, should have made clear what the difficulty with this is going to be: how to apply a criterion without first ascribing a meaning to the very utterance one wants to test for meaningfulness? But perhaps we are trying to deal with the problem at too high a level of generality. Perhaps there is some more subtle way of making the verificationist demand that gets round the difficulty.

110. Malcolm, for example, sometimes applies his verificationism, not directly to a claim, but to the question whether someone understands that claim. He does this with 'I am asleep'. But he still seems to have to understand *something* by 'I am asleep' in order to investigate whether there are any difficulties in telling whether someone else understands it.

110-111. Another move the verificationist might make is to maintain that he does not understand a claim until he is told how to verify it. This may make his position unassailable but it also ensures that he cannot prove very much. In particular, he could not prove to *the maker* of the supposedly unverifiable claim that that claim was meaningless.

111-112. A third possible modification of verificationism is suggested by Antony Flew's attack on theism. Flew argues that theists refuse to allow anything to count against the claim that the Universe was created by an omnipotent, omniscient, supremely benevolent being. They always explain away any apparent contrary evidence, thus depriving their own thesis of content, leaving one wondering what if anything they are asserting. Whatever the merits of this argument, it is probably not nonsensicalist. The realm of the meaningful is never entirely left behind. Questions of compatibility and incompatibility, and hence of meaning, are raised at every stage of the slide towards emptiness, and it is not clear that a stage where meaning is totally absent is ever reached.

112. Although the discussion has been restricted to verificationist criteria of meaningfulness, it should be evident that the prospects for other kinds of criteria are not great. A suspicion that arises when one looks carefully at the idea of such criteria is that nonsensicalists employ *stipulative* criteria, ones that embody a narrower notion of meaning than the ordinary one.

112-114. Wittgenstein speaks of passing from 'disguised' to 'patent' nonsense and of 'operations' that are needed to achieve this. What operations? They cannot be logical operations. One cannot *infer* patent nonsense from disguised nonsense. Nor can one replace disguised nonsense with nonsense that is *synonymous* with it. Could one

unmask disguised nonsense by likening it to something that is patent nonsense? It is hard to see how such a procedure could be compelling. The two locutions will *ex hypothesi* be different, so perhaps one difference is that one makes sense and the other does not. (Wittgensteinians tell us to beware of grammatical resemblances. Here this caution works against them.) And philosophers will almost certainly disagree about what is patent nonsense. Finally, even if one could show by the method of comparison that a locution is excluded from the language, this would not show that someone uttering it meant nothing by it.

114-116. Might there be some *direct* way of alerting someone to the fact that he means nothing by his words? Indeed perhaps this is the only possibility left. Less direct ways seem bound to involve attributing meaning to what one wants to show has no meaning. All one can do is to draw the speaker's attention to an *absence* (*Tractatus*, 6.53). But how does one know of this absence? And how does one draw his attention to it? And even if what looked like a method could be found, why should the speaker trust it rather than the persisting appearance of meaningfulness, the 'staying power' of alleged philosophical nonsense?

116. The suspicion mentioned on p.112 grows stronger: perhaps the conclusion to be drawn from the fact that nonsensicalists seem to have to accord meaning to an utterance in order to get to grips with it is that they have to accord it a meaning in the ordinary sense in order to deny it a meaning in some narrower sense of their own.

116-117. On the whole the nonsensicalist has so far been presented as a polemicist, someone who is out to refute an opponent. The one accused of talking nonsense can always counter by pointing to weaknesses and inconsistencies in the nonsensicalist's position. But the later Wittgenstein often presents his method as therapeutic, sometimes comparing it to psychoanalysis. This is worth taking seriously. Suppose we try to see the nonsensicalist as wanting to help other philosophers out of their perplexities and assume that at least some of the latter want to be helped and are open to the possibility that their perplexities are the result of their having taken nonsense for sense. Might the search for philosophical nonsense be best seen as a cooperative venture?

117-118. Two caveats. First, therapeutic nonsensicalism is far more often mentioned than met with. In practice, nonsensicalists, including Wittgensteinians, are just as likely to be aggressive polemicists as philosophers of any other stripe. Second, many philosophers do not feel perplexed. Even if they once did, many claim to have won through to substantive conclusions, including metaphysical ones. Neither of these points is a reason for denying therapeutic nonsensicalism a hearing.

118-119. The main problem with it is that it is not clear what counts as a *bona fide* cure. Mere relief from perplexity is surely inadequate. Most philosophers probably regard sceptical doubts as a nuisance and would like to be rid of them. Dismissing them as nonsense might seem to be the answer. But there is an obvious danger that someone perplexed by sceptical doubts will allow the nonsensicalist to impose on him a stipulative notion of meaningfulness if this seems to justify dismissing the doubts. Even if we switch from a polemical to a therapeutic conception of nonsensicalism, there has still got to be some way of *arguing* that an utterance is nonsense and this arguing has got to have cogency or something like it. (Peter Hacker believes that the

notion of proof is obsolete in philosophy but it is not clear what he thinks should replace it.)

119-120. There is another way in which nonsensicalism might be seen as therapeutic or at least as conducive to fruitful philosophising. Suppose someone asks, 'Did time have a beginning?' and a nonsensicalist persuades him that he ought first to have asked how we are to 'give sense' to the notion of a beginning of time. Is this not an insight and could it not be recorded as a success for nonsensicalism? Suppose the philosopher had originally been inclined to deny that time could have had a beginning and now accepts that what he should have said was that he had no idea what would count as a beginning of time. The difficulty with seeing this insight as a nonsensicalist one is that, on this showing, there was something right about his earlier denial. It seems therefore that he must have meant *something* by his earlier question and denial: he has not broken through into the realm of the meaningful from a semantic void. And a similar point can be made if he does come up with a way of 'giving sense' to the notion of a beginning of time.

120. Perhaps then the nonsensicalist should be charitably viewed as someone who characteristically goes too far. His demand for the clarification of questions can be helpful but his claims to have exposed sheer nonsense are excessive.

Chapter Ten: What Are We To Conclude About Nonsensicalism?

121. We have seen that certain things can be said in its favour. The following three are perhaps the most important: First, some of the bizarre utterances of those under the influence of drugs can be seen as (inconclusive) evidence for the possibility of IOMs.

121-122. Second, the continued intractability of philosophical problems could mean that there is something wrong with them and what is wrong might be that they are nonsensical. Unfortunately, attempts to *dissolve* philosophical problems by showing them to be nonsensical have not been more successful than earlier attempts to *solve* them. How clear an idea do we really have of what a completely successful solution to or dissolution of a philosophical problem would be like? How much do we really know about what makes incorrect philosophical views – and there must be some – incorrect?

122-123. An explanation was offered in Chapter Eight of how IOMs might be possible, of how it could be that a person is not the final authority on whether he means anything. But there remained the problem of what grounds one could have for overruling someone's sincere claim to be speaking meaningfully. Explaining an illusion involves both explaining the appearance and explaining why that appearance is to be discounted.

123. Clearly, although something can be said in favour of nonsensicalism, it is far from amounting to a vindication. The most serious objection to nonsensicalism – that no way of diagnosing IOMs has been found – remains.

123-124. A suggestion made in Chapter Nine needs to be further examined. Are nonsensicalists using stipulative notions of meaningfulness, ones that are narrower than the ordinary notion? This would explain the absence of uncontroversial examples of philosophical nonsense and also its 'staying power'. And the tendency of nonsensicalists to slip into treating as meaningful what they officially regard as nonsense, for example by asking what it entails, would no longer be surprising. Most significantly, it provides an account of what might be going on when nonsensicalists think they are diagnosing the talking of nonsense. What they are doing is employing the ordinary notion of meaning(fulness) in order to establish something about an utterance and then on the basis of that something concluding that it is not meaningful in some narrower sense of 'meaningful' of their own invention. The suggestion can be illustrated by the example of a fictitious philosopher who believes that contradictions are nonsense, i.e. completely meaningless, and yet tries to prove that what someone says is self-contradictory on the basis of what he thinks he means by it.

124-125. But perhaps only unsophisticated nonsensicalists, such as verificationists, make this sort of mistake. No doubt others will insist that they are talking about meaning in the ordinary sense of the word. But we have seen how *all* nonsensicalists are in constant danger of having to attribute meaning to utterances they hope to prove are meaningless. If they try to avoid doing this, it is not clear how they are to get to grips with the utterances. Even in the most favourable circumstances, when they are dealing with someone who is prepared to accept that his perplexity might be due to his having been taken in by nonsense, it is difficult to see how they could demonstrate that this is so. (This is not to say however that the nonsensicalists's relentless demand for the meaning of utterances might not be in some ways salutary.)

125-126. Some Wittgensteinians will probably claim that they can understand someone's *wanting to say* something without understanding that something, without assigning a meaning to it. But it is hard to see what that understanding could be that stopped short of understanding the meaning of what was said. Again the suspicion surely arises that they are giving the word 'meaning' some restricted sense of their own.

126-127. The main error of those who have kept nonsensicalism alive after the demise of logical positivism is their failure to draw the right conclusions from its demise. Many objections can be made to logical positivism but the question that should have been given most emphasis is this: Can one ever conclude from the fact that a claim is unverifiable that it is meaningless, or should one say rather that it is unverifiable because of what it means? If this had been made the focus of attention, then parallel questions would naturally have been asked about other forms of nonsensicalism, particularly the late-Wittgensteinian form, and they would not have been given the easy ride that they have.