Wittgenstein's Later Nonsense[*]

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Abstract

According to an influential reading of his later philosophy, Wittgenstein thinks that nonsense can result from combining expressions in ways prohibited by the rules to which their use is subject. According to another influential reading, the later Wittgenstein thinks that nonsense only ever results from privation—that is, from a failure to assign a meaning to one or more of the relevant expressions. This chapter challenges Glock's defence of the view that the later Wittgenstein allows for combinatorial nonsense. In doing so, it defends a version of the privation view. According to it, Wittgenstein thinks that nonsense results, not so much from a failure to assign a meaning to an expression, as a failure to use an expression in a way that has a point or purpose. As the chapter shows, this interpretation is consistent with prominent themes in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, such as that meaning and explanation are coordinate notions, that for a word to have a meaning is for there to be a rule-governed practice of using it, that the rules of the practice are arbitrary, and that they determine the bounds of sense.

1. Preamble

Hanjo Glock was the primary supervisor of my doctoral research at the University of Reading, which (to my surprise!) began nearly twenty years ago. He was an inspirational supervisor—excitable, energetic, and enthusiastic—and hugely supportive to the students under his supervision. His vast knowledge of analytic philosophy and its history was an invaluable resource to draw upon, while his irreverent (and, at times, unrestrained) wit offered welcome relief from the uncertainties of early academic life.

In our many meetings, Hanjo's characteristic response to a piece of work I had shared, and in which I had put forward some view or other, was to ask, in a tone as impatient as it was good-humoured, 'But where is the argument!?' It seems, then, a fitting tribute to

present Hanjo with what I hope he will recognise as arguments, whether good or bad, against some views he himself has put forward.

2. Introduction

Nonsense figures prominently throughout Wittgenstein's philosophy. In the earliest entry in the *Notebooks*, he writes:

> Let us remember the explanation why 'Socrates is Plato' is nonsense. That is, because *we* have not made an arbitrary specification, NOT because a sign is, shall we say, illegitimate in itself! (NB, 22 August 1914)

And in a remark written in the final years of his life—between 1949 and 1951—Wittgenstein asks:

> But is it an adequate answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that 'There are physical objects' is nonsense? For them, after all, it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite, is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shewn; but that isn't the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. (OC, §37)

As this last passage indicates, Wittgenstein (early and late) maintains that philosophy itself is characterised in terms of its relationship to (and tendency toward) nonsense:

> The results of philosophy are the discovery of some piece of plain nonsense and the bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language. (PI, §20)

Notoriously, the *Tractatus* concludes with the verdict that it is itself nonsense:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them. (TLP, 6.54)

Given the important role the notion of nonsense plays throughout Wittgenstein's work, an adequate understanding of that work requires an understanding of what nonsense is, for Wittgenstein, and what makes for it.

To make progress on this front, Glock distinguishes two accounts of nonsense.[1] According to *the privation view*, represented by the opening passage from the *Notebooks*, nonsense results 'from our not having assigned a meaning to expressions in a certain context' (2004, 222). On this account, to borrow a well-worn example from Carnap (1959), the sentence 'Julius Caesar is a prime number' is nonsense because of a failure to give a meaning to its constituent expressions.[2] While they might look like familiar English expressions, in this context one or more of them is in fact a meaningless sign.

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[1] For the same distinction in different terms, see (Conant 2001; Diamond 1991).
[2] For the sake of argument, I will take it for granted that such sentences are (in the sorts of context we are invited to imagine) nonsense, as opposed to (merely) false. For discussion, see (Magidor 2016).

According to *the combinatorial view*, in contrast, nonsense results from the way in which meaningful expressions are strung together or, as Glock puts it, 'from the illicit combination of meaningful words' (2004, 222). On this account, 'Julius Caesar is a prime number' is nonsense because, in a sense to be spelled out, the meanings of the words in the sentence do not allow for this combination.

'Why choose?' one might ask. Perhaps there are just different sorts of nonsense—the privation sort and the combinatorial sort. However, there is an influential tradition in Wittgenstein scholarship according to which Wittgenstein—throughout his philosophical career—held only the privation view (Conant 1998; 2000; Crary 2000, 121; Diamond 1991; Mulhall 2007; Witherspoon 2000). Against this, Glock defends a pluralistic interpretation. According to it, Wittgenstein—early and late—holds that nonsense can occur as a result of privation *and* as a result of combination.[3]

In this chapter, I will argue that this is a mistake. In his later work, Wittgenstein does not endorse the combinatorial view or, for that matter, views that entail it. More cautiously, I will argue that the considerations Glock adduces to support the attribution to Wittgenstein of the combinatorial view do not in fact support it. Does that mean I attribute (only) the privation view to the later Wittgenstein? Yes, but, well, sort of.

In this debate, the term 'nonsense' is used in a somewhat restricted manner, specifically, to mean *unintelligible*. As Glock notes (2015, 120), in ordinary parlance, the term can be used instead to mean *pointless* or *futile*. In this sense, it might be nonsense for me to say, 'I am sorry' when it is mutual knowledge that I will perform the relevant action again without hesitation, though of course my sentence is not devoid of sense or unintelligible—it expresses a thought, albeit an insincere one. To anticipate, central to my reading of Wittgenstein is that, while he does not identify the two, he takes there to be a close connection between intelligibility and pointfulness.

To return to the issue at hand, I will argue that, for Wittgenstein, nonsense always results from a lack. However, what is lacking is not best described as the assignment of a meaning to an expression; instead, what is lacking is a purpose that the words might be understood as serving on the relevant occasion. At this stage, this is at best suggestive. I will explain the idea more fully in due course.

Before getting stuck in, two things to note. First, my concerns here are interpretive, not substantive. The question is what view Wittgenstein holds, not whether that view is true or well-supported.

Second, my claims are restricted to Wittgenstein's *later* philosophy. So, I do not deny that in his early or middle periods Wittgenstein advances the combinatorial view (cp. PO, 58–59; VW, 235). My claim is that, if he did advance it then, he abandons it in his later work (roughly, after 1935).

Given this focus, one might think that there is a quick argument for the pluralist reading: The view that there is something common to all cases of nonsense is against both the

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[3] For influential elaborations and defences of this reading, see (Baker and Hacker 2009; Hacker 1986). See also (Glock 1996a, 260–264; 1996c, 184–185).

letter and the spirit of the later philosophy. For Wittgenstein, those cases will fall under the concept of nonsense in virtue of their position within 'a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing', that is, in virtue of 'family resemblances' (PI, §§66–67). So, any reading according to which Wittgenstein takes nonsense to consist always and only in one thing—privation—is a nonstarter.

The quick argument is too quick. Grant that there are many members to the nonsense family. One member of that family is *unintelligibility*. Concerning that family-member, we can ask whether it results from combination or (only) from privation.

A proponent of the argument might say that this only postpones the issue. For the later Wittgenstein, unintelligibly too is a family resemblance concept.

No doubt. But there is still a debate to be had. Among the sentences that fall under the concept of being unintelligible, are there some, according to Wittgenstein, that do so because they involve meaningful words in illegitimate combinations? Glock says, 'Yes'. In what follows, I will explain why I am not yet convinced of that answer.

3. Meaning and use

There are two strategies for resolving this interpretive matter. The top-down approach is to explore Wittgenstein's later conception of meaning and ask whether it rules in or out combinatorial nonsense. The bottom-up approach is to look at specific passages and ask whether Wittgenstein there expresses a commitment to the possibility or otherwise of combinatorial nonsense. I will explore each strategy in turn, starting with the top-down approach.

The main argument that Glock identifies for attributing (only) the privation view to Wittgenstein appeals to Frege's (1953, §62) context principle. Wittgenstein refers with approval to that principle, which he reformulates as follows:

> A word has meaning only as part of a sentence [with a sense]. (PI, §49)

The context principle, so understood, might seem to support the privation view and rule out the combinatorial view. Suppose that a sentence lacks a sense. It follows that its constituent words lack meaning. In turn, it follows that the sentence's lacking a sense cannot be due to what those words mean, since they do not mean anything.[4]

However, as Glock argues, 'Wittgenstein's later conception of meaning militates […] against the restrictive [context] principle' (2004, 228). According to Wittgenstein:

> For a *large* class of cases of the employment of the word 'meaning'—though not for all—this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (PI, §43; see also §432)

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[4] For this line of thought in relation to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, see (Conant 2000, 191–194; Diamond 1991, 98–100). For the same line of thought in relation to the later Wittgenstein, see (Diamond 1991, 107; Witherspoon 2000, 323–24).

This might simply seem a more liberal version of the context principle, but it is clear that Wittgenstein takes the meaning of a word to correspond, not to its use on a particular occasion, but to its usage, that is, to the way of using it.[5] Consider:

> Only in the practice of a language can a word have meaning. (RFM, VI §41)

> A meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it. [...] That is why there exists a correspondence between the concepts 'rule' and 'meaning'. (OC, §§61–62)

The last remark points to a further aspect to Wittgenstein's conception of meaning. For a word to have meaning is for there to be rules governing its employment (cp. PI, §355). He goes as far as to say:

> The rule-governed nature of our languages permeates our life. (ROC, §303)

Given this conception of meaning, as determined by rules for the use of expressions, it is no surprise that he introduces the (infamous) notion of a language-game:

> Following according to the rule is FUNDAMENTAL to our language-game. (RFM, VI §28)

This takes us back to Wittgenstein's apparent endorsement of the context principle. As he explains in PI, §49, Wittgenstein takes the truth in that principle to be that a word is not a name, or more generally does not have a meaning, 'except in a game', that is, unless there is a rule-governed use for it.

This reading of the later Wittgenstein is familiar enough. The point is that, if correct, the argument from the context principle in support of the view that he recognises only nonsense by privation is unsound. Wittgenstein did not really think that a word has a meaning only when it appears in a sentence with a sense. A word which does not appear in such a sentence might nonetheless have a meaning insofar as there is a rule-governed use for it (Glock 2004, 229).

Moreover, one might think, Wittgenstein's later conception of meaning provides a straightforward explanation for how nonsense occurs other than by way of privation. If expressions are meaningful in virtue of being subject to rules of use, then nonsense results 'from combining meaningful expressions in a way that is prohibited by the rules for the use of these expressions' (Glock 2004, 222).

One response to this is to deny that Wittgenstein accepts the relevant conception of meaning. According to Cavell, for example, Wittgenstein's view is precisely that 'everyday language does not, in fact or in essence, depend upon such a structure [...] of rules' (1976, 48).[6] However, I will grant that Wittgenstein thinks of meaning as a matter of rules of use but argue that he is anyway not committed to the combinatorial view.

This is instructive. Some interpreters who attribute to Wittgenstein (only) the privation view seem to think that, were Wittgenstein to hold that expressions have context-independent meanings in virtue of the rules governing their employment, then he

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[5] For this point, see (Baker and Hacker 2005, 153; Glock 1996b, 207; Schroeder 2006, 172; Whiting 2008).

[6] For otherwise diverse readings of Wittgenstein that deny he takes language to involve rules, see (Glüer and Wikforss 2010; Hanfling 1980; Hutchinson 2007; Luntley 2003; Witherspoon 2000).

would allow for combinatorial nonsense. For example, Witherspoon writes, 'If words belong to a system of [rule-governed] symbols, then they are meaningful symbols. This leaves open the possibility that meaningful symbols might be combined into a sentence-like formation that is not itself meaningful' (2000, 331). That possibility might be consistent with the view of meaning as consisting in rule-governed use, but it is not entailed by it, or so I will argue.

4. Sense and pointfulness

First, I will show that the reading of Wittgenstein sketched in the previous section, while correct, is incomplete. There is a further dimension to his later conception of meaning, one which is not overlooked in the literature, but which does not always receive the emphasis it deserves. According to Wittgenstein:

> The word 'language-*game*' is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or form of life. (PI, §23; see also PI, §19; ROC §302)

Following Cavell (1989, 41; see also Moyal-Sharrock 2015), we might distinguish two senses of 'form of life'. There is a biological sense—concerning a life-form—and an ethnological sense—concerning a way of life. I focus here on the latter, which Wittgenstein has in mind in remarks like the following:

> What belongs to a language-game is a whole culture. (LC, 8)

> Language, I should like to say, relates to a *way* of living. (RFM, VI §34)

Insofar as a language-game is bound up with a form of life—in the ethnological sense— it is bound up with certain values, ends, or interests. To illustrate, consider:

> A tribe has two concepts, akin to our 'pain'. One is applied where there is visible damage and is linked with tending, pity, etc. The other is used for stomach-ache, for example, and is tied up with mockery of anyone who complains. 'But then do they really not notice the similarity?'—Do we have a single concept everywhere where there is similarity? The question is: Is the similarity *important* to them? (Z, §380)

In this case, the fact that the two pain-like terms are to be used in different ways reflects what matters to the members of the tribe. Perhaps they have treatment only for tissue damage. Since expressions of internal pain serve no purpose and waste precious time and resources, they are to be discouraged. The point is not how to interpret the example—its details can be filled in in countless ways—but to illustrate that, for Wittgenstein, the rules of a language-game, hence, the meanings of expressions, are bound up with and in the service of certain ends or purposes:

> The game, one would like to say, has not only rules but also a *point*. (PI, §564)

> Concepts lead us to make investigations. They are the expression of our interest and direct our interest. (PI, §570)

> We could say that people's concepts show what matters to them and what doesn't. (ROC, §293; see also RFM, I §74; Z, §§387-388)

To sum up, Wittgenstein's later conception of meaning is one according to which a word has meanings in virtue of there being a usage for it, more specifically, a usage subject to

rules that determine whether that word is employed correctly or incorrectly on a given occasion, more specifically still, rules bound up with the interests and needs of language-users. This conception points to a distinctive way of cashing out the privation view. For Wittgenstein, nonsense results when a person uses words in the absence of the sort of situation that provides or speaks to the relevant interests or needs (cp. RFM, I §132).

By way of analogy, suppose that two people are moving what look like chess pieces around a chequered board. They move the horse-shaped pieces two squares in one direction, one in another. They move the castle-shaped pieces horizontally and vertically, never diagonally. When one piece enters the square another occupies, the latter piece is removed from the board. And so on. However, the goal of the activity is for each player to remove only the other's horse-shaped pieces. Or perhaps it is simply to make pretty patterns. Whatever the players are doing, it is not playing chess. Given the goals that inform the activity, the pieces as employed on this occasions are not subject to the rules of chess.

In a similar fashion, for Wittgenstein, nonsense results when a person utters words that might look like familiar words of (say) English, but that utterance is not recognisable as in the service of the purposes with which the rules governing the relevant English words are bound up. So, whatever the person is doing in that situation, it is not using those English words subject to those rules.

To make this more concrete, consider:

> The words 'I am here' have a meaning only in certain contexts, and not when I say them to someone who is sitting in front of me and sees me clearly. (OC, §348)

This passage is especially relevant for the present dispute, as the putative nonsense is clearly not of the combinatorial sort—Wittgenstein explicitly allows that that combination of words might express a sense in a suitable context. The issue, then, is that the context is not suitable. Why? Because there is no point or purpose with which the use of the relevant expressions engages. For illustrative purposes, suppose that the role of the indexicals 'I' and 'here' is to allow the audience to locate or identify a person and place, respectively. In the context Wittgenstein describes, there is no such need to be met. So, whatever is going on there, it is not a context in which the speaker is participating in the practice of using expressions that answer to or serve that need.

By way of contrast, consider a context in which two people are having a conversation via Zoom. One holds a map up to the camera and says, 'I am here', perhaps adding, 'And our friend is there' (cp. Whiting 2017, 426–428).

It is helpful to compare this reading of Wittgenstein with one Conant—an influential proponent of the privation (only) interpretation—rejects. According to it:

> When Wittgenstein says it [a sentence such as 'I am here'] is being used in an *unsuitable* situation, what he means is that we do not understand the *point* of the speaker's saying this perfectly determinate thing when he does. (1998, 230)

The view I attribute to Wittgenstein is not that 'I am here' makes sense in the context he describes, but its utterance serves no discernible purpose; rather, the view is that, when the utterance of 'I am here' serves no discernible purpose, the sentence in that context lacks sense.

Although he does not develop the point as I have done here, Glock agrees that in Wittgenstein's view:

> Whether an utterance makes sense, and what sense it makes, is not simply determined by the linguistic form of the sentence uttered, its constituents and mode of combination […] Instead, it depends on the circumstances in which the utterance is made. (2004, 232)[7]

But Glock thinks this point speaks against, not for, the idea that nonsense results only via privation. If an expression lacks meaning '*because of its context* then its lack of meaning is not just a matter of privation, it is a matter of being in inappropriate company, just as the combinatorial view has it' (2004, 229–230; also 2015, 125). So, in attributing the above conception of what makes for nonsense to Wittgenstein, one might think that I concede the main point.

However, a better way to put the idea is that the expression is meaningless because *it lacks appropriate company*. The dearth of a suitable end or purpose amounts to the *absence* of an *enabling* condition on sense, rather than the *presence* of a *disabling* condition (cp. Bader 2016).

To put this another way, my claim is not that, for Wittgenstein, nonsense occurs due to some sort of 'clash' or 'incompatibility' between the sense a sentence—or the meanings of its constituent expressions and the rules for their employment—and the context of utterance (cp. Conant 1998, 223), which might be understood as a matter of the circumstances frustrating or conflicting with the point or purpose of using those rule-governed expressions in that combination. Rather, my claim is that, for Wittgenstein, nonsense occurs when an utterance simply does not count as the use of expressions subject to the relevant rules because there is no connection between the circumstances of utterance and the point or purpose associated with the rule-governed use of those expressions.

The chess analogy is helpful here. The suggestion is not that, if people are moving pieces so as to make pretty patterns (etc.), they are playing chess in a way that violates its rules or frustrates its goal; it is rather that, given their goal, those people are not playing chess at all, hence, the context is not one to which the rules of chess apply.

One might object to an interpretation of Wittgenstein which relates rules governing the use of words—grammatical rules—to certain ends on the grounds that it clashes with his claim that such rules are 'arbitrary':

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[7] A further claim is that, for Wittgenstein, the same sentence in different contexts might bear different senses (see Conant 1998; Dobler 2013; Travis 1989; 2006). For challenges to this interpretation, see (Bridges 2000; Whiting 2017).

> Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose. (PI §496; see also Z, §322)

There are many dimensions to Wittgenstein's insistence on the arbitrariness of grammar (see Forster 2004). The salient one here is that, unlike the rules of cooking, the rules that constitute language-games are not justifiable or evaluable by reference to some independently specifiable purpose or goal. If I stick to certain instructions when cooking, I might cook badly. If I use others, I might cook well. So, in a straightforward sense, the first set of instructions are worse than the second. Alternatively: So far as cooking goes, following the first set of instructions is wrong, while following the second set is right. In contrast, according to Wittgenstein, 'if you follow grammatical rules other than such-and-such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else' (Z, §320).

The view I attribute to Wittgenstein is not that the rules of grammar are to be justified or evaluated by reference to the relevant ends. It is, rather, that the rules are bound up with certain ends such that, if on a given occasion the use of a word is unconnected to those ends, then it does not qualify as a use of the word to which those rules apply, though it might qualify as the use of another word to which some other rules apply. So, I do not deny that, for Wittgenstein, the meaning-constituting rules for the use of words are in the relevant sense arbitrary.

5.   Explanations of meaning

On the reading of Wittgenstein I have developed, nonsense is not the result of the meanings of the relevant expressions or, more carefully, the rules prohibiting their use in certain combinations. In support of this reading, I have insisted that we look at Wittgenstein's wider conception of meaning. But this cuts both ways. Glock argues that some of Wittgenstein's other commitments are incompatible with the view that sentences like 'Julius Caesar is a prime number' are nonsense due only to privation. In particular, Glock (2004, 230) invites us consider Wittgenstein's suggestion that there is a correlation between the meaning of a term and an explanation of its meaning:

> If you want to understand the use of the word 'meaning', look for what one calls 'an explanation of meaning'. (PI, §560)

With respect to Carnap's sentence, a person who utters it might explain, '"Julius Caesar" refers to the famous Roman general, and "is a prime number" means *is divisible only by 1 and itself*'. If the meaning of an expression is what is revealed in an explanation of its meaning, this person reveals meanings for the relevant expressions, despite the sentence involving them lacking sense.

This point proves too much. Consider its application to the Carnap sentence as a whole. Its utterer says, '"Julius Caesar is a prime number" means *the famous Roman general is divisible only by 1 and himself*'. Clearly, Wittgenstein would not take this to show that the sentence has a sense.

The thought behind PI, §560 is that what a word means cannot transcend the explanations speakers give of its meaning. As Glock is aware, it does not follow from this that any explanation a person gives of a word captures what, if anything, it means.

Suppose, for example, that a person says, by way of explanation, that the word 'cold' (in English) means *warm*. Given its established usage, this is false.

Another way to put this is to say that, for Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word corresponds to a *successful* explanation of it, i.e., one that succeeds in explaining what the word means. The dispute is then precisely whether the speaker's explanations of the words that appear in the Carnap sentence are successful.

I have argued that it is consistent with Wittgenstein's suggestion that meaning and explanation are coordinate notions that nonsense results only from privation (of purpose). However, reflection on such explanations leads to another argument against this interpretation.

Explanations of meaning serve, for Wittgenstein, as expressions of grammatical rules, such as:

(1) 'Julius Caesar' applies to the famous Roman general.
(2) 'is a prime number' applies (only) to a number that can be divided only by 1 and by itself.

One might think that the very idea that rules of this sort determine the meanings of the expressions they concern brings with it the idea of combinatorial nonsense. Indeed, Glock suggests that (1) and (2) entail that Carnap's sentence is nonsense:

> The explanations imply that the referent of 'Julius Caesar' is not within the range of meaningful application of 'is a prime number'. (2015, 124)

In that case, the sentence lacks a sense because of the rules governing its constituent expressions, hence, because of what they mean. In that case, in turn, there is combinatorial nonsense.

However, the rules do not imply what Glock says they do; rather, they imply that the referent of Julius Caesar is not within the range of application of 'is a prime number', that is, within its extension. So, what those rules imply is that Carnap's sentence is false, rather than nonsense, in any context of utterance in which its constituent expressions qualify as subject to (1) and (2).[8]

My reply to Glock assumes that 'applies to' as it occurs in (1) and (2) is equivalent to 'is true of'. In other work, Glock argues that the rules determinative of the meanings of expressions are not rules of truth of this sort. As he puts it, 'one can apply a word in a way which is *semantically correct*, without applying it correctly in the sense of applying it to say something *true'* (2005, 299; see also 1996a, 150–151; 2019). Elsewhere, I have argued against views of this sort on substantive grounds (Whiting 2016). But, as

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[8] To address this, Glock might strengthen (2) as follows:
(3) 'is a prime number'' meaningfully applies (only) to any number that can be divided only by 1 and by itself.
However, (3) is too strong. With (1), it entails that the following sentence is senseless: The number of countries in the UK is a prime number.

stressed at the outset, the present focus is on matters exegetical.[9] It is time, then, to look at the passages Glock appeals to in support of his reading and assess whether they do in fact support it.

6. A drop of grammar

I turn now to the bottom-up approach to defending the pluralist interpretation.

Glock quotes the following when defending the claim that, for Wittgenstein, the meaning-determining rules 'draw the bounds between correct and incorrect uses of words', such that incorrect usage results in nonsense (2004, 233):

> 'I know what I want, wish, believe, feel, … ' (and so on through all the psychological verbs) is either philosophers' nonsense or, at any rate, *not* a judgment *a priori*. (PPF, §309)

Also:

> I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking.
>
> It is correct to say 'I know what you are thinking', and wrong to say 'I know what I am thinking'.
>
> (A whole cloud of philosophy condenses into a drop of grammar.) (PPF, §315)

Here is a way of capturing what I take to be Glock's reading of these remarks. Wittgenstein starts with some examples of philosophical nonsense ('I know…'). The remark that follows concerning what it is correct and incorrect to say is then the voice, not of the philosopher, but of Wittgenstein offering a diagnosis of the nonsense: The philosopher's words are nonsense because they fail to accord with the rules governing them. This shows that, for Wittgenstein, nonsense results in some cases by combining expressions in ways prohibited by the rules for their employment.

There is, however, an alternative (I dare say, better) way to read the passages. Again, Wittgenstein starts with examples of philosopher's nonsense. Why are they nonsense? Because their words do not engage with appropriate needs or interests. For illustrative purposes, suppose that the point of employing the English word 'know' is to resolve some doubt (OC, §121) or to discriminate reliable from unreliable informants (OC, §575).[10] The philosopher Wittgenstein invites us to imagine does not purport to speak to those needs when they use that word. So, their use of it is not a use of the English word 'know'.

The remark that follows concerning (in)correct use is not, I submit, Wittgenstein's explanation of why those words make no sense in that combination. Rather, it represents an attempt to find a sense for the philosopher's words, which requires considering 'the occasion and purpose of these phrases' (PPF, §312). And Wittgenstein's

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[9] Moore suggests that Wittgenstein has such a distinction in mind but on the basis of lectures from the 'middle period' (PO, 79–80), so I set this aside. In his later work, Wittgenstein suggests that grammatical rules include those governing the substitution of expressions or inference (e.g., PI, §558). One might call these rules for *truth-preservation*.

[10] For more on this theme, see (Craig 1990).

suggestion is that we can imagine those words serving a purpose in ordinary—non-philosophical—contexts of linguistic instruction. So, the remark about what it is or is not correct to say is not in Wittgenstein's voice, but that of a person teaching someone that the word 'know' applies in the third-person case but not in the first-person case. In this way, I suggest, Wittgenstein is taking the words back from their 'philosophical' or 'metaphysical' use to their 'everyday' use (OC, §347; PI, §§116, 372).

So, the passages from PPF do not support an interpretation of the later Wittgenstein according to which he thinks there is such a thing as combinatorial nonsense. Moreover, to return to an issue raised at the end of the last section, those passages do not demonstrate that Wittgenstein is using 'correct' to mean *semantically correct*, such that what it is correct to say comes apart from what it is true to say. It is consistent with PPF, §315 that, in those contexts in which the rules are in force, hence, when the use of the expressions hooks up with relevant ends or concerns, 'knows' truly applies in the third-person case but not the first-person case.

7. The bounds of sense

Glock cites another series of passages from the later work as evidence that, for Wittgenstein, 'whether the occurrence of a word on a particular occasion results in nonsense depends at least partly on what other words it is combined with (2004, 233; see also Schönbaumsfeld 2010, 655–656):

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

> To say 'This combination of words has no sense' excludes it from the sphere of language, and thereby bounds the domain of language. But when one draws a boundary, it may be for various kinds of reason. If I surround an area with a fence or a line or otherwise, the purpose may be to prevent someone from getting in or out; but it may also be part of a game and the players are supposed, say, to jump over the boundary; or it may show where the property of one person ends and that of another begins; and so on. So if I draw a boundary-line, that is not yet to say what I am drawing it for.

> When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. Rather, a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation. (PI, §§498–500) [11]

Why might these remarks be thought to commit Wittgenstein to the possibility of combinatorial nonsense? Perhaps because Wittgenstein here says that what has or lacks sense is a 'combination' of words. However, to refer to combinations of words may be just another way of referring to sentences, that is, to the items that are candidates for being sense and nonsense. Moreover, while Wittgenstein refers here to combinations of words, that is to sentences, there is no suggestion that those combinations lack sense *in*

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[11] Diamond (1991, 106–109) and Conant (2001, 14) suggest that PI, §500 rules out the possibility of combinatorial nonsense. For a response to this, see (Schönbaumsfeld 2010, 655–656).

virtue of the meanings of the words they contain, the ways in which they are combined, or the rules governing their use.

Wittgenstein also speaks in these passages of the 'boundaries of language'. Does that support the pluralist interpretation? It does if Wittgenstein thinks that the boundaries are fixed by rules that determine which combinations of words make sense and which do not. But, first, Wittgenstein does not say anything in the passages that commit him to this. Second, the privation view, at least, as I have developed it, points to a different way in which a boundary to language might be determined—it lies at the point at which the use of the relevant expressions ceases to engage with suitable interests or purposes.

One might object that my version of the privation view struggles to make sense of Wittgenstein's idea of *exclusion from a language*. On the interpretation I defend, a combination of words such as 'I am here' that in one context lacks sense might in another context have sense, hence, belong to a language. In that case, the combination is not really excluded.

If there is a problem here, it is a problem, not only for my reading of Wittgenstein, but for Glock's pluralist alternative. Glock agrees that, for Wittgenstein, nonsense can result from the absence of a suitable context, hence, that sense can be secured by the provision of a suitable context. In any event, there is no problem here. Exclusions need not be absolute. Indeed, Wittgenstein's remarks on the different purposes for which a boundary to language might be drawn suggests that they are not.

So, the interpretation I defend has no difficulty with the idea of exclusion from a language. Moreover, I suggest that it does a better job of capturing that idea than its competitor. On the combinatorial view, while 'Julius Caesar is a prime number' is nonsense, it is constituted by words of English. In that case, it is an English sentence, hence, a sentence in a language. On the privation view, in contrast, while those words might look like words of the English language, they are not.

It is instructive to note that the themes of exclusion and senseless sense which run throughout PI, §§498–500 crop up again in a remark from the same period concerning 'Moorean' sentences of the form: *p*, but I don't believe that *p*.[12] Wittgenstein writes:

> Again, you must not forget that 'A contradiction doesn't make sense' does not mean that the sense of a contradiction is nonsense.—We exclude contradictions from our language; we have no clear-cut use for them, and we don't want to use them. And if 'It's raining but I don't believe it' is senseless, then again that is because an extension along certain lines leads to this technique. But under unusual circumstances that sentence could be given a clear sense. (RPP II, §290)

Here, Wittgenstein allows that in a suitable context the Moorean sentence has a sense. What context? Wittgenstein is not explicit about this, but he does offer some clues. He suggests that the sentence would make sense if the speech in which it figures were 'automatic' (RPP II, §292). To explain what he means by this, Wittgenstein invites us to imagine a case in which '*two* people are talking through one mouth' (RPP II, §293).

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[12] For different perspectives on Wittgenstein on Moore's paradox, see (Heal 1994; Williams 1998; Moran 2002).

Presumably, one person utters the first conjunct—'It is raining'—while the other utters the second—'I don't believe it'.

I take it that what Wittgenstein is thinking of here is a situation in which a person's mind is fragmentated and in which they are alienated or disassociated from their own thoughts. Consider the hackneyed example of the patient on the therapist's couch: My parents love me, but I don't believe that. If the Moorean sentence makes sense in a therapeutic context, or some other circumstance of dissociation, then its senselessness outside of such a context cannot be due to the fact that the rules governing the use of its constituent expressions prohibit that combination. After all, those rules do allow for those expressions in that combination to express a sense.

To return in light of this to the issue at hand: In his remarks on the theme of senseless sense in RPP II, Wittgenstein does not have in mind combinatorial nonsense. This supports the suggestion that, in the companion remarks on the same theme in PI, Wittgenstein does not (or, at the very least, need not) have in mind combinatorial nonsense. Moreover, Wittgenstein's remarks on the Moorean sentence confirm that he views the exclusion of a combination of words from a language as neither permanent nor unconditional.

8. Conclusion

I have defended an interpretation of Wittgenstein's later philosophy according to which nonsense results only from privation. When a sentence is senseless, on Wittgenstein's view, what is lacking is not so much the assignment of meanings to its constituent expressions—an idea which smacks of some kind of semantic voluntarism—but, rather, a point or purpose with which its words engage.

This reading, I have argued, is not in tension with attributing to Wittgenstein the view that words have context-invariant meanings in virtue of rules governing their use. The key idea is that those rules are themselves bound up with certain needs or ends such that, if a context of use is not related to those ends, it is not a context to which those rules apply.

In contrast, Glock defends an interpretation according to which, for Wittgenstein, nonsense (also) results from using words in ways that the rules for their use prohibit. I have argued that the passages Glock cites in support of this reading do not in fact support it, and also that a commitment to such combinatorial nonsense is not a consequence of Wittgenstein's later conception of meaning.

Some defenders of a privation reading suggest that, for Wittgenstein, there is no significant difference between philosophers' nonsense—like 'Julius Caesar is a prime number', 'I know what I am thinking', etc.—and mere gibberish (Conant 2001, 14; Diamond 2000, 151). Nothing I have said here commits Wittgenstein to such a view. What difference there is between philosophers' nonsense and mere gibberish, for Wittgenstein, is a nice question, but it is a question for another occasion.[13]

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[13] For discussion, see (McManus 2014).

Works by Wittgenstein

I use the standard abbreviations to refer to Ludwig's Wittgenstein's works:

LC   *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, edited by C. Barrett. 1966. Oxford: Blackwell.

NB   *Notebooks 1914-16*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and P. Geach, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Second edition. 1979. Oxford: Blackwell.

OC   *On Certainty*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, translated by D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe. 1969. Oxford: Blackwell.

PO   *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, edited by J. Klagge and A. Nordmann. 1993. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

PI   *Philosophical Investigations*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, revised by P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and J. Schulte. 1953/2009. Oxford: Blackwell.

PPF   *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment*. In PI, 183-243.

RFM   *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, edited by G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Third edition. 1978. Oxford: Blackwell.

ROC   *Remarks on Colour*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe, translated by L. L. McAlister and M. Schättle. 1980. Oxford: Blackwell.

RPP II *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology: Volume II*, edited by G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, translated by C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue. 1980. Oxford: Blackwell.

TLP   *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. 1961. London: Routledge.

VW   *The Voices of Wittgenstein: The Vienna Circle, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Friedrich Waismann*, ed. G. P. Baker, translated by G. P. Baker, M. Mackert, J. Connolly, and V. Politis. 2003. London: Routledge.

Z   *Zettel*, edited by G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. 1967. Oxford: Blackwell.

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