NONSENSE AND ILLUSIONS OF THOUGHT[1]

Herman Cappelen
Arché/University of St Andrews and CSMN/University of Oslo

This paper addresses four issues:

1. What is nonsense?
2. Is nonsense possible?
3. Is nonsense actual?
4. Why do the answers to (1)-(3) matter, if at all?

These are my answers:

1. A sentence (or an utterance of one) is nonsense if it fails to have or express content (more on 'express', 'have', and 'content' below). This is a version of a view that can be found in Carnap (1959), Ayer (1936), and, maybe, the early Wittgenstein (1922). The notion I propose abstracts away from their favored (but wrong) theories of what meaning is. It is a notion of nonsense that can be appealed to by all semantic frameworks and all theories of what content is, but structurally it is just like e.g. Carnap's. Nonsense, as I construe it, is accompanied by illusions of thought (and I think that was part of Carnap's conception as well).
2. Yes. In particular, I examine three arguments for the impossibility of illusion of thought (which on my construal accompanies linguistic nonsense) and they are all unsound.
3. There might be a lot of nonsense, both in ordinary and theoretical speech. In particular, it is likely that much of contemporary philosophy consists of nonsense. Empirical work is required to determine just how much.
4. The struggle to avoid nonsense (and achieve meaningfulness) is at least as

important as the struggle for truth. The avoidance of nonsense is a precondition not just for having a truth-value but also for more important properties such as saying something interesting or kind. If there might be a lot of nonsense around, then some of the most important challenges for humans are to understand its source and to develop strategies for avoiding it.

Nonsense was at the center of philosophical debates in the first half of the twentieth century. This was the heyday of the great theorists of nonsense, Wittgenstein and Carnap in particular. They argued that large swaths of discourse (and of philosophy in particular) were nonsense. They thought that many of those we consider great thinkers were not thinking at all. According to Carnap, what some considered the high points of human intellectual achievement are no more than a bunch of people making noises and marks on paper. Those who read, commented on, and developed their work suffered from the same illusion. They had what appear to be discussions; they wrote books and papers apparently responding to each other. But it was all the most fundamental kind of failure: it was neither true not false, no thoughts were expressed, and there was no agreement or disagreement. It was all just a complete waste of time, energy, ink, and paper.

Needless to say, these were provocative, exciting and powerful ideas. They captured the attention of all philosophers and dominated philosophical discussion in the first half of the twentieth century. Then something happened. The interest in nonsense faded quickly, and it is now about as far from the center of philosophical attention as can be. This had many reasons, but two are worth highlighting, since they are both misguided:

- *First reason for declining interest in nonsense: rejection of verificationism.* Carnap and the logical positivists developed their theories of nonsense by relying on a particular theory of meaning, *the verification theory*. This theory has fallen out of favor. If one thought that their conception of nonsense was essentially tied to that particular theory of meaning, then rejection of the theory of meaning would explain lack of continued interest in (and exploration of) nonsense. This motivation is misguided since Carnap's theory of meaning is incidental to both his conception and theory of nonsense. I develop this point below.

- *Second reason for declining interest in nonsense: move away from normative philosophy of language.* Philosophy of language (and communication) moved away from the normative motivation found in Frege, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ayer and many of their contemporaries. These authors' interest in describing how language worked served, in large part, a normative goal: to figure out how to make language better and how to improve it as a cognitive tool. The idea of improving our cognitive conditions through an improvement of language is largely absent from dominating trends in contemporary philosophy

of language. Consider the following group of leading philosophers of language: Davidson, Montague, Kaplan, Kripke, Putnam, Burge, Grice, Stalnaker, Soames, Schiffer, Perry, and linguists like Chomsky, Heim and Kratzer. They have very little in common, but one important feature they share is a more or less complete disregard for (and lack of interest in) the normative motivations found in e.g. Frege and Carnap. They do not see their goals as that of improving language or our cognitive devices. Their goal is to *describe* language. To tell us how it works. The focus on nonsense was seen as part of the evaluative-critical-normative approach to philosophy of language, and that approach is alien to the descriptivists.[2]

This second motivation is misguided for two reasons. First, even if you don't care about normative approaches to language, you should care about nonsense since if some sentences are nonsense, that's an important descriptive fact about those sentences. Second, the normative component of philosophy of language should never have been abandoned. The era of purely descriptive interest in philosophy of language was, from a historical point of view, an aberration and the combined descriptive-cum-normative approach is what will have lasting philosophical significance (The purely descriptive tradition inherits its presumption of philosophical significance and relevance from the descriptive-cum-normative tradition.).

A final introductory, big-picture comment about how nonsense can play a role not just in a theory about communication, but in philosophy more generally: In metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, and ethics, there are important ongoing debates between relativists, expressivists, invariantists, and contextualists. These views all have one thing in common: they are, broadly speaking, attempts to make sense of—to rationalize—various areas of discourse. There is, however, another option to be explored more systematically: that certain domains of discourse are complete failures. Sometimes an entire domain of discourse must be rejected as nonsense and can't be made sense of. It is the ultimate kind of failure. The aim of this paper is to show how that option can be explored more systematically.

What follows is divided into three parts. Part I presents the conception of nonsense that I focus on. Part II discusses whether nonsense so construed is possible. Part III discusses whether that kind of nonsense is actual (and how we can go about finding it).

PART I: NONSENSE CARNAP-STYLE

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[2] There are important exceptions to this: most prominently Sally Haslanger's idea of philosophy of language as an ameliorative project (2000, 2005, 2006, 2012). In some discussions of vagueness the topic comes up, see Braun and Sider (2007) and Williamson's discussion semantic nihilism (1994, section 2.2.). Another areas where the normative approach comes in is e.g. Eklund's discussion of incoherent concepts (see e.g. Eklund 2002*a*, 2002*b*, 2005).

I am going to use as my starting point an account of nonsense that's central to Carnap's paper, "The Elimination of Metaphysics Through the Logical Analysis of Language" ("Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache").[3] Carnap operates with two notions of nonsense in that paper.[4] I will focus on just one of them: the view of nonsense as sentences that have parts that lack meaning.[5] In its most abstract form, Carnap's claim has two steps:

Step 1. An account of the conditions that must be satisfied for an expression (and so sentence in which that expression occurs) to be meaningful.

Step 2. An empirical claim about which expressions satisfy the conditions for being meaningful according to the account in Step 1.

These two steps can be instantiated in any number of ways, all depending on what one thinks meaning is and which expressions one thinks satisfy the conditions required for meaningfulness according to that theory. Carnap's implementations were these:

Step 1-C. Carnap adhered to the verification theory of meaning, according to which "the meaning of a sentence lies in its method of verification. A statement asserts only so much as is verifiable with respect to it" (76).

Step 2-C. Carnap then went on to make a number of claims about terminology that didn't satisfy the conditions in Step 1. His primary focus was terms used by other philosophers. According to Carnap, much of Western philosophy fails to satisfy the conditions for meaningfulness. He says, for example,

> Just like the examined examples "principle" and "God," most of the other *specifically metaphysical terms are devoid of meaning*, e.g. "the Idea," "the Absolute," "the Unconditioned," "the Infinite," "the being of being," "non-being," "thing in itself," "absolute spirit," "objective spirit," "essence," "being-in-itself," "being-in-and-for-itself," "emanation," "manifestation," "articulation," "the Ego," "the non-Ego," etc. (67)

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[3] As Conant (2001, 16) points out, the translation of the title is misleading: it should be 'overcoming' rather than 'elimination'.

[4] What Conant (2001, 18) calls 'type (i)' and 'type (ii)' nonsense. See also Diamond 1981.

[5] The second notion invoked in Carnap's paper is one where no expression lacks meaning, but where their combination violates what he calls "logical syntax" (68): "So far we have considered only those pseudo-statements which contain a meaningless word. But there is a second kind of pseudo-statement. They consist of meaningful words, but the words are put together in such a way that nevertheless no meaning results" (67). This notion of nonsense will be put aside. For discussion, see Magidor 2009. I find Magidor's view of sentences that violate 'logical syntax' convincing (and don't have much to add to it). Nothing, however, that I say in this paper will depend on rejecting that notion of nonsense as Magidor does. If you like it, then it's another avenue for exploring nonsense and would strengthen the case for a rejuvenated focus on the phenomenon.

Carnap concludes that "The alleged statements of metaphysics which contain such words have no sense, assert nothing, are mere pseudo-statements." (67).   He goes further, arguing that all normative speech is nonsense as well:

> …the same judgment must be passed on all *philosophy of norms*, or *philosophy of value*, on any ethics or esthetics as a normative discipline. For the objective validity of a value or norm is (even on the view of the philosophers of value) not empirically verifiable nor deducible from empirical statements; hence it cannot be asserted (in a meaningful statement) at all. In other words: Either empirical criteria are indicated for the use of "good" and "beautiful" and the rest of the predicates that are employed in the normative sciences, or they are not. In the first case, a statement containing such a predicate turns into a factual judgment, but not a value judgment; in the second case, it becomes a pseudo-statement. It is altogether impossible to make a statement that expresses a value judgment. (77)

Nonsense as Threefold Failure: Semantic, Speech Act, and Cognitive

I like to think of Carnap-style nonsense as a form of *failure*. However, there are many kinds of failure in this vicinity and Carnap didn't carefully distinguish between them. In particular, Carnap did not carefully distinguish between the following three:

- *Semantic failure*: failure to have a proper semantic content (what this consists in will depend on your favourite semantic theory)
- *Failure to say something (or express a content):* e.g. failure to assert a content by uttering a declarative sentence.
- *Failure to have a thought when attempt to think what is expressed by the utterance of a sentence*

For Carnap all these failures occur together in the cases he considers. He goes straight from failed semantic content, to there being no content asserted and that there is absence of thought. But that's too quick. The difference kinds of failures could occur independently of each other. Consider for example views (such as those defended e.g. by Sperber and Wilson (1986), Kent Bach (1994), Scott Soames (2008)) according to which semantic content of a sentence relative to a context is a kind of propositional skeleton (something non-propositional and not truth evaluable), which in context succeeds in asserting a proposition (and express a thought, i.e. something truth evaluable). Maybe this can be described as a case in which there is semantic failure, but where there's success at speech act and thought level. Another possible combination that the agents' thoughts are in perfectly good shape, but she ends up uttering sentences that exhibit the first two kinds of failure (i.e. no semantic content and no content expressed).

In what follows, I will, like Carnap focus on cases where there is failure at all three

levels and I'll use an expression from Evans,[6] 'illusion of thought', to talk about the third kind (though I think a more thorough investigation than there's room for in this paper should say more about these complexities[7]).

Nonsense Also Fails to Express an Attitude

Carnap recognized that this view would generate a "painful feeling of strangeness":

> Our claim that the statements of metaphysics are entirely meaningless, that they do not assert anything, will leave even those who agree intellectually with our results with a painful feeling of strangeness: how could it be explained that so many men in all ages and nations, among them eminent minds, spent so much energy, nay veritable fervor, on metaphysics if the latter consisted of nothing but mere words, nonsensically juxtaposed? And how could one account for the fact that metaphysical books have exerted such a strong influence on readers up to the present day, if they contained not even errors, but nothing at all? (78)

In considering Carnap's answers to these questions, one must tread carefully. In answering, Carnap describes philosophical nonsense as a failed attempt to express "*the general attitude of a person towards life (*'Lebenseinstellung, Lebensgefühl'*)*" (78). Carnap isn't very clear on exactly what a *Lebenseinstellung* is, what it is to express it and how attempting to express it helps respond to the two questions in the passage quoted above. He describes *Lebenseinstellung* as a person's "emotional and volitional reaction to the environment, to society, to the tasks to which he devotes himself, to the misfortunes that befall him" (79). This attitude is, according to Carnap, expressed in *everything* a person does or says, and it "also impresses itself on his facial features, perhaps even on the character of his gait" (79). Despite its expressing itself in everything we do, there are good and bad ways to express it. Expressing it in the form of philosophy is a bad way to express it because philosophical nonsense "pretends to be something it is not" (79). Such texts pretend to be arguments with contents but aren't. Both the reader and the writer suffer an illusion. Nonsense speakers, according to Carnap, are "deluding" themselves in a way that poets and musicians are not (musicians and poets, according to Carnap, are not pretending to do something they are not) (79-80). Carnap's attitude can be summarized in the slogan, "Metaphysicians are musicians without musical ability" (80).

There are many exegetical challenges here. In particular, it is unclear how Carnap

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[6] Evans talks of "the *illusion* of thought-expression and of understanding" (1982, 31). Carnap doesn't talk about illusions of thought though he clearly thought that those who speak nonsense do so while thinking that they have the thoughts expressed by the nonsensical sentences, even though no such thoughts exist. More on the nature of illusions of thought in Part II.

[7] For more on the distinction between speech act content and semantic content, see e.g. Salmon (1991), Cappelen and Lepore (2005).

thinks what he says about philosophy and *Lebenseinstellung* "account[s] for the fact that metaphysical books have exerted such a strong influence upon readers up to the present day, if they contained not even errors, but nothing at all" (78). However, putting those issues aside, it should be clear that Carnap is *not* a proto-expressivist. According to expressivists, the *function* of e.g. normative language is to express attitudes. That's what normative language does when it does what it is supposed to do. That is what success consists in, according to the expressivist. That is not how Carnap of the *Überwindung* thought of metaphysics and normative language. Two points are important. First, it is not, according to Carnap, the purpose of such speech to express an attitude to life. That is one important way in which he is not an expressivist. Second, the speech in question doesn't succeed in expressing a *Lebensgefühl*—it fails even at that. It is a failed attempt to do what the musician does well.

Three Kinds of Objections to Carnap

Here are three kinds of objections one might raise against Carnap:

1. You can argue against the theory of meaning that Carnap relies on. You can say that since his version of verificationism is unacceptable, the argument is unsound and therefore fails.

2. You can argue that the phenomenon he claimed existed cannot exist. There can, for example, be no such thing as illusion of thought.

3. You can argue that even if you accept his theory of meaning and grant that nonsense is possible, the particular application of it, e.g. the application to Heidegger, is based on a misreading of the relevant texts, or that it is based on a misapplication of the verification theory of meaning, or both.

In what follows I will not address (3). I have no particular interest in showing that some of Heidegger's texts are nonsensical though, for all I know, they might end up being good candidates (Determining whether they are will, for reasons that will become clear, require careful empirical and exegetical work that goes beyond the scope of this paper.). The rest of this paper is an attempt to address issues in the vicinity of questions (1) and (2). I will argue that nonsense is possible, that it doesn't rely on the verification theory of meaning, and that we might find it in places we care a lot about.

PART II: ARE NONSENSE AND ILLUSIONS OF THOUGHT POSSIBLE?

Carnap did not talk about illusions of thought, though it is obvious that he thought that what he called 'nonsense' was accompanied by such illusions. He didn't, for

example, think that Heidegger's thought processes were in good shape and that his only problem was getting his thoughts down on paper. Carnap thought that what the nonsensical speech by Heidegger was accompanied by mental events that were equally devoid of content. Carnap, and those who read him thinking they understood him, were suffering from illusions of thought[8].

Responses to Carnap primarily addressed his verificationist theory of meaning or his reading of e.g. Heidegger. The responses were not of the form: *the kind of phenomenon Carnap describes is impossible*. That last issue became an important topic in a different debate: the debate over externalism in philosophy of language and mind.[9] That discussion is interesting in three respects. First, it is historically interesting that this discussion is run largely disconnected from the literature on nonsense in Carnap (and also Wittgenstein, Ayer, other logical positivists). The two literatures should be closely connected. Second, the discussion of illusions of thought in the externalism literature is divided in a surprising way: some participants in that debate are happy to endorse illusions of thought as a consequence of their externalist positions. McDowell (1977, 1986) and Evans both embraced as a corollary of their view that there could be such illusions (in a way, their theories were constructed to have that consequence). For others (see e.g. Wikforss 2007 and Segal 2001), that implication of externalism was a central motivation for constructing an alternative to externalism. Third, those in the latter camp—i.e. those who see illusions of thought as pre-theoretically unacceptable and aim for theories that make it impossible—typically don't present detailed arguments for their views. One camp simply assumes that such illusions are commonplace while others find that view absurd. This isn't an entirely unusual situation in philosophy. All discussions have to start somewhere and either one of those positions would be a decent starting place. However, to get the two camps closer to each other, it is worth delving a bit deeper into the possible reasons that could be given on either side. I should start out putting by my cards on the table: I find myself squarely in the Carnap-McDowell-Evans camp. I see no pre-theoretic reason why we shouldn't consider it simply an open empirical question how often such illusions occur. However, as a gesture towards those who find the very idea problematic (and also to clarify the idea itself), I now consider three arguments against the possibility of illusions of thought.

Impossibility 1: Illusion of Though Requires a Meaningful Second-order Thought

According to the Carnapian view defended in this paper, a subject can take herself to have a thought even though she does not have one. Here is a sketch of an argument to

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[8] As i mentioned above, this is not to say that one couldn't hold a view where the mind is shielded in some way from the linguistic nonsense. On such a view, the only mistake the nonsense speaker makes is thinking that a thought is expressed by a sentence. This is not how Carnap construed the situation, and it won't be explored further here (though it is an interesting option.)
[9] See Wikforss 2007 and references therein.

the effect that that kind of failure is impossible.[10]

1. Illusion requires falsity. The thinker must have a false belief (or other attitude) about her propositional attitudes.
2. A natural development of (1) is that for a subject to have the illusion of thought, she must have a false belief of the form *I was thinking that p*.
3. Suppose *p* is nonsense.
4. Then: *I was thinking that p* can't be nonsense, since it has to be false.
5. Step 4 requires an account of (or semantics for) the second-order thought that allows the complement *p* to be nonsense and the entire self-attribution to be not-nonsense and false.
6. The correct account of or semantics for second-order thoughts requires that the complement in *A thinks that p* be propositional.
7. So: illusion of thought is impossible.

More work is needed to make this line of thought maximally precise, but enough is said above to make clear what the basic weaknesses of the argument are. Steps 1, 2 and 6 are all dubious.

Step 2 is dubious because even if you think illusions of thought require false beliefs about thoughts, the false thoughts need not be of the form, *I was thinking that p*. It could be a demonstrative thought of the form, *That was a thought* (accompanied by a demonstration of the cognitive event that was not a thought). A demonstrative thought of that form would be false if the demonstrated event wasn't a thought (i.e. we have no reason to think the demonstrative thought is nonsense just because it demonstrates nonsense).[11]

Step 6 is problematic along many dimensions. First, there's no consensus on what the correct semantics for belief reports is (and no consensus on the correct account of second-order thought), and so any claim about what the correct semantics *allows* will be controversial and require very substantive theoretical commitments. (It is for example entirely non-trivial why (6) should be true if one endorses a version of Davidson's (1968) paratactic theory.) Putting that lack of consensus aside, I know of no view that rules out an account of second-order thought according to which such a thought *presupposes* that the complement is propositional, and if that presupposition

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[10] I have not found this argument in print. The argument is inspired by one Paul Boghossian presented (but didn't endorse) in conversation. I should add Boghossian prefers a simpler version of the argument that replaces (3)-(6) with (3′)-(4′):

3′. If *p* is nonsense, then *I was thinking that p* is nonsense.

4′. If *I was thinking that p* is nonsense, then it can't be false.

[11] The subject can also have a false second-order belief that quantifies into the complement, i.e. a thought of the form, *I was thinking something (at t)*. Again, this allows for falsity but doesn't require the nonsense to occur in the complement.

fails, the thought is false.

Finally, Step 1 of the argument is dubious or at least in need of further argument: we could think of an illusion of thought along the lines of an illusion of a dagger, where that is not to be construed as having a false belief about the presence of a dagger, but simply as what it looks like grammatically: the illusion of a dagger. Similarly, we can have the illusion of a thought and not construe that as the having of a false belief about a thought-like event.

That the argument sketched in (1)-(7) can be resisted in various ways is not to deny that there are considerable difficulties in spelling out the details of a view that endorses illusions of thought. My favored strategy is the denial of Step 2, i.e. to agree that illusion requires falsity, but highlight the demonstrative thought (i.e. *That was a thought*) as the false one. That leaves open the possibility that the second-order thought is also nonsensical (i.e. that thinking that *I was thinking that p* when *p* is nonsense, is itself a nonsense thought), but also leaves open the possibility that it is not (maybe by a version of the presupposition move discussed in connection with the reply to Step 6).[12]

Impossibility 2: Practical and Theoretical Reasoning

Åsa Wikforss (2007) raises the following objection to versions of externalism that imply the possibility of illusions of thought:

> From the point of view of the individual, after all, it is as if there was a thought available, one that she reasons with and acts on (Oscar in world 2 votes against Bush in the elections, takes part in rallies, etc). How can this be explained if one endorses (either version of) externalist semantics? (173)

Wikforss' concern is this: if the agent has an illusion of thinking a thought, that illusion can (at least appear to) play a role in practical reasoning and to have inferential connections to other thoughts. Reasoning that involves those inferential connections seems to explain action. But if there's nothing but an illusion of thought, then no reasoning has taken place and the natural ways to rationalize the actions are off the table. Gabriel Segal also raises a version of this concern. Segal is addressing McDowell's view that empty referring expressions result in illusions of content. He objects:

> The main argument for attributing empty concepts in all these cases (ghosts,

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[12] Note that this is not to take a stand on the issue of whether there can be some kind of privileged self-knowledge of the contents of thoughts we have. See discussion in e.g. Burge 1988, and the papers in Ludlow and Martin 1998, Nuccetelli 2003, and Wikforss 2013, For all I have said, when we have a thought, we have some kind of privileged (self) knowledge of that content.

ether, etc.) is simply that by so doing, *and only by so doing*, can we make psychological sense of a very wide variety of human activity and cognition. (2001, 37, my italics)

A proponent of illusions of thought should give a two-fold answer to this cluster of concerns. First, of course when there's illusion of thought, there is illusion of reasoning, and so illusion of practical reasoning. It should come as no surprise that we are fallible with respect to the nature of the cognitive mechanisms that trigger action. We might think we act for reasons when we don't (we don't need to think about illusions of thought to recognize that). Second, that doesn't mean the action in question can't be explained in ways that in part appeal to the beliefs, desires, and reasoning of the agent. Such an explanation could, at least in principle, appeal to the illusion of thought, i.e. that there was an illusion can be part of the explanation. It can also, at least according to one of the proposals above, appeal to second-order thoughts about the nonsensical cognitive event. Here is what I have in mind. Suppose Carnap was right and many of the sentences written by Martin Heidegger are nonsensical (and accompanied by illusions of thought). Consider a particular act by Martin: the act of writing down one of those nonsensical sentences, *S*. We want an explanation of why Martin did what he did; in particular, why did he write down *S*? The rough and ready commonsense explanation in the nondefective cases goes like this: *Martin had the thought that p, he wanted to communicate p to others, he thought that the sentence S expressed p, and that by writing down S his desire could be fulfilled*. If, however, Martin didn't have a thought, this simple story can't work. But there are related stories we can tell. Here is one of them: *Martin thought that that (demonstrating some cognitive event) was a thought, he wanted to communicate that thought to others, he thought that the sentence S expressed that thought and that by writing down S his desire could be fulfilled*. So, he had a bunch of false second-order beliefs, and those, combined with his desires, explain his actions. Many variations on such explanations are available to those who endorse illusions of thought. Details will vary from case to case, but the general point is that there is no objection in principle to making sense of (rationalizing) actions that seem to be triggered by reasoning involving illusions of thought.

Before leaving Impossibility 1 and Impossibility 2 behind, I should add that discussion of each could easily fill an entire paper. Far too little work has been done spelling out these lines of thought in careful detail and my own views are by no means settled. That said, one central goal of this paper might be best thought of as conditional: if illusions of thought are possible, how do we determine that they are actual? In order to get to that part, full exploration of the ideas in Impossibilities 1 and 2 will have to be deferred to another occasion.

Impossibility 3: Nonsense and Illusions of Thought Not Possible Without Verificationism

Some might think that Carnap-style nonsense is ruled out if verificationism is given up. The goal of the remainder of Part II is to convince the reader that this is wrong. It is, of course, true that *Überwindung* is written in a way that makes the charge of nonsensicality arise from an endorsement of verificationism. However, verificationism is more or less incidental to the kind of argument used by Carnap, and switching to any one of the more popular contemporary alternatives to verificationism leaves plenty of room for (broadly) Carnap-style explorations of nonsense.

To see this, it helps to focus on a central tacit assumption in Carnap. Carnap assumes that we are *fallible* with respect to whether we are expressing contents and entertaining thoughts. According to Carnap, we can think that we are doing both even though we are not.[13] One source of that fallibility is that *we are fallible with respect to grounding facts of content: that in virtue of which there is content can be absent even when the agent takes content to be present.*

In what follows I want simply to point out that this kind of fallibility is implied by any of the many theories of meaning that are currently more popular than verificationism.[14] To show this is both difficult and easy. The obvious difficulty is that there is no agreement in contemporary philosophy about what theory of meaning should replace Carnap's. There are a plethora of options and no consensus. The easy part of the answer is that no contemporary theory has a built-in *guarantee of infallibility* with respect to whether a content is encoded, expressed or entertained. So the fallibility premise of Carnap's argument is preserved, no matter which non-verificationist theory you happen to favor. As a heuristic, think of a theory of meaning as minimally giving an account of what makes it the case that (1) and (2) don't express contents (and so are nonsense) while (3) does (and isn't nonsense):

1. Blahbedy blah red if.
2. Blahbedy red.
3. Nora is two years old.

A theory of meaning, in the broad sense I have in mind, is one that tells us not just what grounds semantic facts, but what grounds content at all levels: semantic content, speech act content, and thought content. The grounding facts might be of different kinds, one (e.g. linguistic content) might be parasitic on another (thoughts or intentions). These are issues the resolution of which goes far beyond anything I can address in this paper, and so what follows is somewhat unsatisfactory: I remind the reader of some leading theories in this domain, but won't commit to any one theory of

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[13] Note that this is the assumption Impossibility 1 tried to challenge. I am assuming Impossibility 1 is wrong for reasons spelled out above.

[14] I used to like the classification of semantic theories into those dealing with 'foundational semantics' and those concerned with 'descriptive semantics' (see Stalnaker 1997). I now find that distinction unclear and unhelpful, but if you like it, then as a heuristic, read my 'theory of meaning' as 'foundational theory of content'.

the various interconnections within the domain.

'Meaning is use', 'functionalism', and 'conceptual role'. There is a huge cluster of theories of meaning that focuses on the *use* or *function* of an expression. Some of those who like such views endorse slogans like 'Meaning is use'. Others prefer the label 'functionalism'. Within each of these clusters there are large numbers of variations. I want to focus on the kind of fallibility mentioned above and ask: *Do any of these theories rule out that an agent can believe that content is present when it is not?* The answer is a very obvious 'no'. There is nothing in any of these theories that guarantee that the agent is infallible with respect to the presence of the correct kind of patterns of use or functional role. I am not infallible with respect to what dispositions I have with respect to an expression *E*, and certainly not whether those dispositions are of the kind that suffice to ground meaning. Note that we have dispositions with respect to the meaningless 'Blahbedy' and the meaningful 'Nora'. So the *right kind of dispositions* must be in place.[15] None of us are infallible with respect to whether we have the right such dispositions.[16] Equally obviously, I am not infallible with respect to its use or related properties in a larger linguistic community of speakers.

Lewis on conventions and naturalness. Many contemporary philosophers of meaning are inspired by the work of David Lewis. In his book *Conventions* (1969), Lewis described the kind of conventions (of truthfulness and trust) that made it the case that a group of speakers speaks one language rather than another. This part of Lewis' work was more or less silent on the question of how subsentential expressions have content and in later work (1983) he appealed to the notion of naturalness as a partial explanation of that issue. Despite the considerable difficulties in working out the details of both projects, it is obvious that no speaker is infallible with respect to the presence of the relevant grounding facts: we are not infallible with respect to what conventions are in place in our community and certainly not about whether there's something natural to anchor reference of a particular expression.

Kripke, Putnam, Burge: Externalism. One of the most influential theories of meaning traces back to work by Kripke (1980), Burge (1979) and Putnam (1975) (as will become salient below, this is also the intellectual terrain where I feel at home). Their theories differ, but have a couple of things in common: the facts that ground content are not all 'in the head'. Content is determined by acts of introduction (baptism, stipulations or other introductory events), communicative chains of transmission, and in many cases deference to experts or the community of users. What is important for our purposes is that no speakers are infallible about the presence of these conditions. They can be wrong about whether an expression had the right kind of introductory event, the right kind of transmission or whether deference has taken place.

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[15] It is not as if we have no dispositions to use 'Blahbedy'; they are just not of the right kind.

[16] The same point applies if you think something like 'functional role' is what grounds content: we can be wrong about whether the right kind of functional role is associated with an expression.

It is simply a corollary of all of these theories that with respect to a particular speech episode, the speaker and of course also the interpreters, are fallible with respect to whether the grounding conditions are in place. In particular, whatever is introspectively available doesn't guarantee infallibility with respect to the presence of the grounding conditions. So these views all leave open the door to Carnapian nonsense: unbeknownst to speakers and hearers, sequences of sentences could be uttered without content at *any* level[17].

PART III: THE ACTUALITY OF NONSENSE

How to Discover Nonsense

That nonsense is possible doesn't mean it's actual. Even if there's some actual nonsense, it might be marginal, uninteresting, and not worthy of much attention. Carnap's claim was interesting not just because he raised the possibility of nonsense, but because he located it in domains that matter (or, rather, in domains that many people think matter—if Carnap is right, they don't matter.) If we abstract from the verificationism and details of Carnap's application, does nonsense still have relevance? Do we have any reason to think it worthy of our attention? My answer is a tentative 'yes', summarized as Pocket-Nonsense:

> *POCKET-NONSENSE. A version of Carnap's claim can be defended, but its scope is very different from Carnap's. It is not that specific subject matters (e.g. ethics, religion, aesthetics, or metaphysics) are nonsensical, but rather that when language is introduced and used in defective and irresponsible ways, it can lead to pockets of nonsensical speech and nonsensical cognitive events. When this happens, the individual isn't to blame, nor is it easy for the individual to avoid being engulfed in nonsense. It can happen as a result of participation in a defective linguistic practice where individual speakers are unable on their own to make the relevant correction.*

Pocket-Nonsense is in need of both evidence and elaboration. There are two central challenges:

1. Develop diagnostics for nonsense.
2. Find concrete instances of nonsense.

Both steps are bound to be controversial. The first is controversial because there is no

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[17] This is obviously just a sample of the possible options – but the general idea should be clear enough: it is implausible in the extreme that any theory of what grounds content will imply the relevant kind of infallibility.

consensus on the nature of meaning/content, and such diagnostics can't be developed without making assumptions about that. The second step is bound to be controversial for two reasons. First, it requires detailed knowledge of how language is and has been used by a particular individual and the group of speakers she takes herself to be a member of. Second, the claim that a certain pattern of speech is nonsense is bound to be resisted by those engaging in that speech: no one likes to be told that they have written papers and books consisting of something that's just nonsense. In general, nonsense-accusations are bound to be vigorously contested (and such accusations are even hard to believe because it is very hard for someone to take seriously the idea that they have had an illusion of thought).

Diagnostics for Nonsense: Two Strategies

Here are two strategies for discovering nonsense. Particular proposals will often mix elements of both:

- *Strategy 1*. Pick your favorite theory of meaning. Start checking whether there are pockets of discourse where the grounding facts are absent.
- *Strategy 2*. Develop diagnostics for nonsense that are plausible independently of any one of the standard theories of meaning.

The first strategy has the disadvantage of being hostage to a particular theory of meaning, and so those committed to alternative views (or those uncommitted), will feel minimal pressure. The second strategy isn't tied to any particular theory of meaning, and has the added advantage that it can help us adjudicate between competing theories of meaning: a good theory of meaning should classify the nonsense cases identified through Strategy 2 as failures.

On the Normative Aims of a Theory of Meaning

I will pursue a version of Strategy 2 inspired by my favored theory of meaning (i.e. a version of externalism). How does one identify pre-theoretically plausible diagnostics for nonsense? Here is a rough picture of the project as I see it. The goal of a theory of meaning is to spell out that in virtue of which expressions have the contents they have, or that which grounds content.[18] To have a content or a semantic value is a kind of *success*. It is what is needed for a speech or cognitive act to *go well*. This is already a normative description of the target. It requires an account of the distinction between going well and failing. So to have a sense of what we are aiming to capture, we need some pre-theoretic grasp on when things are going well and when not. To do that, we can start by thinking about the good cases or we can start by thinking about the bad cases, i.e. the failures. Both approaches are valuable though the former is the standard one. What I propose to do is articulate some pre-theoretically plausible conditions for

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[18] See Yalcin 2013, 20 on various ways to spell out 'ground' or 'in virtue of' here.

when we have a fundamentally defective linguistic speech act and a fundamentally defective linguistic practice. I use these as diagnostics for the presence of nonsense.[19]

Signs of Failure: Failed Introductions, Failed Transmission, Failed Deference

Here are two conditions such that if one or more of them obtain, we have evidence that things are going very badly. Pre-theoretically, we would want a theory of meaning either to recognize this as failure or provide an account of how things can still be going well despite the appearance of failure:

- *F1*. The term *T* was introduced in a defective way.
- *F2*. The transmission of *T* through a chain of communication has been defective.

Note that if either of these conditions obtain, then someone who uses *T* deferentially (i.e. uses it to mean *whatever it means in the linguistic community*) is at risk of linguistic failure because there is, so to speak, nothing to defer to.

For these conditions to be effective diagnostics, we need greater clarity on what count as defective introductions and defective transmissions (and so failed deference). Here are some suggested sufficient conditions:

- An introduction is defective if there was no appropriate dubbing, demonstration, or intention by the person introducing the term.
- A transmission is defective if it is not content-preserving.

These rather vague elaborations are again in need of elaboration, but rather than dwell here I want to consider some actual cases of speech that might be defective along these lines. That again can help us illuminate the conditions. We shouldn't just start with some abstract conditions and then look for cases satisfying those. We are equally likely to make progress by starting with some cases that are defective and use those to articulate the more general principles (and then eventually reach some kind of reflective equilibrium).

A couple of disclaimers first: Discovering failure along the dimensions hinted at above requires detailed knowledge of empirical facts about a linguistic practice. This information is extremely difficult to get hold of—sometimes impossible. As a result, the illustrations below should be taken as idealized, toy examples inspired by real cases. I can't claim to know enough about each case to conclude with a very high

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[19] I think Carnap thought of his theory of meaning, verificationism, much in this way: it was a blatantly normative proposal. He thought verifiability was a *good* thing, and that its absence was a *bad* thing. The former is a sign of things going well linguistically and the latter a sign of things not going well. It wasn't simply a description of what meaning is but a proposal of what meaning should be.

level of confidence that nonsense has occurred.

Nonsense 1: Recanati on Lacan

I am going to follow a tradition that I find both puzzling and somewhat objectionable: philosophers who write on nonsense turning on other philosophers. For some reason, philosophers of nonsense love to turn the charge of nonsensicality *at other philosophers*. They don't, typically, attack those writing on e.g. forestry, interior decorating, or sports. Following this tradition, my first illustration of nonsense will be from one of the usual suspects—the kind of texts often described as recent 'continental philosophy'. I should add right away that even though I start with such a case, my central interest is in cases much closer to home.

In the paper "Can we Believe what we do not Understand?" (1997), François Recanati characterizes some of the sentences used by followers of Lacan in the following way:[20]

- They defer to Lacan, i.e. central concepts are used by the followers to mean whatever Lacan meant by them.
- Lacan didn't mean anything by those terms—he failed to introduce terms with meaning.

Why did he fail? There might be no point in speculating about the details. It could be some kind of cognitive failure on his part or it could be intentional deception—we simply don't know. What matters is that, according to Recanati, we have a fundamentally defective introduction of terms, those terms are passed along among those who speak and write about Lacan, and, put simplistically, they defer to the meaning they assume Lacan has given those words. Recanati concludes that in these cases there is no content:

> In Lacanian cases the accepted sentence possesses a deferential character but the attempted deference fails: No user *x* has the cognitive resources for determining the content of the term to which the deferential operator applies, hence no content is expressed, in that context. (92)

The basic structure is fairly clear: A fundamentally defective source, and widespread deference to that source as an assumed authority on the relevant content. If that is a correct description of the situation, a theory of meaning should mark it as fundamentally defective—the 'nonsense' label is one way to do that. If 'having content' marks a form of success, this kind of case is a good candidate for failure.

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[20] Recanati speaks with some authority on this topic: before his interest turned to issues in analytic philosophy, Recanati was one of Lacan's most prominent students.

If this is the right diagnosis (and there's at least some suggestive evidence that it is), then we have a situation much like that described by Carnap. Without any commitment to verificationism, we have evidence of a situation where literally thousands of people give talks, write, read, referee and publish papers, but where there is a kind of complete failure—something plausibly described as nonsense.[21]

The kind of case Recanati describes isn't isolated. In *Fashionable Nonsense* (1999), Sokal and Bricmont describe a number of texts that might share many of the crucial features of Recanati's. Despite the title of their book, Sokal and Bricmont don't try to establish the absence of content in any of the texts they discuss. Their focus is on *mistakes* and *confusions* about science and mathematics (and those require the presence of content). That said, their book provides fertile hunting grounds for those interested in looking for related cases within a certain fragment of the so-called 'continental tradition' in contemporary philosophy.[22]

Nonsense 2: The Use of 'Intuition' in Contemporary Analytic Philosophy

The risk of nonsense is not confined to academic subcommunities that mainstream analytic philosophers feel little or no affinity with. I will use as my next illustration the use of 'intuitively', 'intuition' and cognate terms in what can roughly be characterized as 'contemporary analytic philosophy'. If what I say about these cases is correct, the problem is widespread—many sentences in contemporary philosophical texts might be nonsensical (and accompanied by illusions of thought).

'Intuition' is used promiscuously in contemporary philosophy and in *Philosophy without Intuitions* (Cappelen 2012) I argued that this use is deeply defective, potentially so defective that it results in nonsense. Here are the disturbing features of many uses of 'intuitive':

- *Distancing from English*. The speaker doesn't want to use the term with the meaning it has in English.
- *Deferential intentions*. The speaker is unable to articulate what the term means, and defers instead to its use in 'the philosophical community'.

I am going to call such speakers 'deferential-"intuition"-users' (DIUs, for short).

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[21] I should highlight again that the kind of failure encountered here is highly dependent on the details of the case. I've assumed that Recanati's description of the situation is correct and, for all any of us know, it could be. A great deal of historical and textual work would be needed to establish this (and it might be that the needed information is no longer available to us).

[22] Maybe the best example in this vicinity is the paper Sokal submitted to the journal *Social Text*. Sokal intentionally tried to write nonsense, he intended to mislead his readers, not by getting them to entertain false beliefs, but to get them to think the text itself was meaningful. I said Lacan might have been intentionally deceptive, we don't know. What we do know is that Sokal was intentionally deceptive (though whether in the relevant way, is hard to tell).

- Some DIUs assume that their linguistic subcommunity contains experts on the extension of 'intuitive' (just as there are experts on some natural and social kinds).

So far this is a familiar situation, what gives rise to concern is the following facts about the DIUs' linguistic community:

- The DIUs are simultaneously members of several subcommunities in which the term is used in significantly different ways.
- We cannot even assume that each of those subcommunities is using the term in a meaningful way: some of the subcommunities do, some don't.
- Those considered experts come from different subcommunities and have significantly different ideas about (i) how to define 'intuitive', (ii) what paradigms of 'the intuitive' are, (iii) what its theoretical role is, and (iv) whether 'intuition' denotes a natural kind.

Here are some corollaries:

- There is no communally agreed upon definition
- There's no communally agreed upon set of paradigms—that is, no collection of cases that would be considered clear instances of the intuitive.
- There is no communally agreed upon theoretical role.

These are empirical claims about a linguistic practice, and it would go beyond the scope of this paper to substantiate it (for elaboration, see Cappelen 2012, chapter 3). Here I want to focus on what we should say about a practice if it is correctly so characterized. Does the above characterization provide reason to think speech by DIUs is nonsensical? They are certainly in a potentially pernicious linguistic predicament. If the content of DIUs speech is fixed by connection to a historical chain of transmission (or 'a pattern of use in their community'), then the absence of a unified such chain (i.e. the absence of a unified linguistic community) could generate a serious kind of linguistic failure. How serious is that failure and what are its consequences? In order to respond to those questions, two issues need to be addressed:

1. If the situation is as described above, is that sufficient for the DIUs' deference to fail? Another way to articulate this question: If the situation is as described above, is that sufficient for there to be an absence of the appropriate kind of 'historical chain of transmission' to defer to and so for there to be a failed deference?
2. Even if there is a failed deference by the DIUs, does that mean the DIUs fail to say something and, even more radically, to express and entertain thoughts when using 'intuitive' and cognate terms?

In response to (2): I am going to assume that work by Kripke, Putnam, Burge and others has made a strong case that, at least in some cases, contents of speech and thought are fixed by deference to something 'outside the speakers' mind'. With nothing to defer to, there's a crash—something has gone very wrong. The current hypothesis is that what has gone wrong is a failure to secure content. Some readers might get off the boat here—some might reject all forms of externalism and some might retain a level of content even when the external content is gone (and so the absence of the externally fixed content doesn't result in complete absence of content). The second group should still find what I say interesting, but the former will find the details of what I say below less interesting, though the general structure should be of interest.[23]

Even for those of us with strong externalist convictions, the question of what is required for there to be something appropriate to defer to is difficult and so the answer to (1) is bound to be controversial. What I'm proposing is that if a user of some expression, E, satisfies the following three conditions, then we have some evidence that we are faced with a potentially meaningless use of E:

    i.   The speaker is a member of a number of distinct subcommunities in which E is used in significantly different ways;

    ii. The speaker is unaware of (i); and

    iii. The speaker defers to the use it has in 'the community' without any particular subcommunity in mind and with (broadly speaking) causal connection to a multiplicity of communities.

Here are two analogies to highlight the relevant features of the situation I claim many DIUs are in. First, consider an attempted deferential use of 'Bob' when there's no *one* historical chain of transmission that the speaker is connected to. She tries to use 'Bob' to refer to *whatever it refers in her community*, but it has no unique reference: thousands of creatures (humans, mice, birds, alligators, companies, etc.) are called 'Bob', and so the speaker fails to refer, there's a crash, a complete lack of content (if she tries to think *that Bob is nice* she fails—she has an illusion of thought). If I am right about the facts, the use of 'intuition' is in relevant respects like that.

A second analogy can be found in Gareth Evans' description of the process through which terms change reference (see 1982, Chapter 11). Here is a very rough description of how he thinks of that process. There's an expression, E, that first refers to an object, x. Then information from another object, y, gets mixed up with

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[23] Suppose you are someone who endorses a theory of meaning radically different from those I endorse. Here is a prediction: when you have specified the conditions you think need to be in place for there to be content (for an act to be contentful), I can find cases similar to those I discuss in the text that are failures according to your alternative theory of meaning.

information from *x*, and the community enters a middle period. When information from *x* is eliminated from the practice, *y* is established as the referent of *E* and the reference change from *x* to *y* is complete. According to Evans, the middle period is defective and *E* fails to have content in that period. Its meaninglessness generates illusions of thought.[24] If you share Evans's view about the middle period, you should be even more concerned about 'intuitive'. The situation for 'intuitive', as I have described it, is significantly worse than Evans' middle period.

That is as much as I can do in this paper to make the *prima facie* case that uses of 'intuitive' and cognate terms are so defective that they should be classified as nonsensical. I turn now to two further issues. First, a more careful description of what it is like to engage in nonsense speech and to have an illusion of thought. Then in the final section of the paper, I generalize what I have said about 'intuitively' to many central terms in philosophy—namely, those involved in verbal disputes, which I claim to be widespread.

A More Careful Description of a Nonsensical Event Involving 'Intuitive'

What is it like to speak nonsense and have an illusion of thought? It's no different from speaking meaningfully and having a thought. 'From the inside' the bad case is just like the good case. That said, it is important for a theory of nonsense to recognize that a nonsensical episode is *always* accompanied by genuine thoughts. Our cognitive lives don't consist of candidate attitudes standing in line one after the other to be entertained in turn, one at a time. At any one moment a subject has a large number of thoughts, beliefs, and other propositional (and also non-propositional) attitudes. If at one time there is an illusion of thought, that illusion will be surrounded (or accompanied or whatever metaphor you prefer) by genuine thoughts and attitudes of various kinds. To get a sense of what I have in mind consider this sentence:

> It is intuitive that there are mountains in Switzerland.

You can read it, you can say it, you can try to assert it, you can try to think it, and you'll probably even think you believe it. If I am right, those acts have several features: when you read and say the sentence, you have the false belief that it (i.e. the sentence) has a content, the content *that it is intuitive that there are mountains in Switzerland*. There is no such content, so you are wrong (those italicized words fail to denote a content). Even more radically, when you try to think *that it is intuitive that*

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[24] One of Evans' many excellent examples involving natural-kind terms is 'turkey'. Evans points out that "'turkey' was originally applied to the guinea fowl, which was brought to Western Europe via Turkey—the bird we now call 'turkey' is native to the New World" (1982, 390, n. 16). So 'turkey' started out referring to the guinea fowl. There was then a middle period in which the information associated with 'turkey' came from both turkeys and guinea fowls. According to Evans, that period is the meaningless period—the period during which speech involving 'turkey' denoted neither turkeys nor guinea fowls. Finally, the practice then stabilized, and information from guinea fowls was eliminated and reference to turkeys established.

there are mountains in Switzerland, what you do isn't to think a thought, but something else (It's introspectively like a thought, maybe a bit like saying the sentence to yourself.). The point I was trying to highlight above is that this doesn't imply that you have an empty mind—where *all* that's going on is the illusion of something going on. There will be many thoughts in the vicinity and they will accompany the illusion. In this particular case, we can expect the subject to think *that there are mountains in Switzerland*, to think *that that sentence is about Switzerland*, to think *that I am thinking about something that can be described as 'intuitive'*. Those are all thoughts and will often accompany the nonsensical event.

This is relevant to a consideration that Scott Soames brings up when he considers the possibility that the introduction of the term 'water' was defective. Soames asks: if that were the case, what should we say about subsequent uses of 'water'? Here is one part of his response:

> One might maintain that since the presuppositions associated with introduction of the expression are false, one must conclude that it never acquired a meaning. If so, then the term must be judged to have been meaningless throughout the period in which speakers took themselves to understand it. *However, such a judgment seems harsh. We may presume that during the period in question, speakers used sentences containing the term to convey lots of information.* (2002, 281-2, my italics)

Ignoring various features that are specific to this example, one question to focus on is this: does it count against the claim that an utterance, *u*, of sentence *S* is nonsensical that *u can convey information*? I don't think so. An utterance of a sentence, even a nonsensical one, will convey all kinds of information. First, information about the act itself will be added to the common ground: that the sentence was uttered is now shared knowledge. Another large and related category of information is metalinguistic: e.g. that the speaker thinks the sentence is meaningful. If the sentence has the form '*Fa*', we have added to the common ground that the speaker thinks that whatever is in the extension of '*a*' is in the extension of '*F*'. These thoughts can be entertained even if '*Fa*' is nonsense. And those metalinguistic thoughts are likely to be part of the larger cloud of content that surrounds the utterance of a nonsensical sentence.

Clarifications and Reservations

Above I used 'intuitive' and cognate terms as illustrations, but also said that (i) the detailed evidence (i.e. the evidence that DIUs had the relevant properties) was given in Cappelen 2012, and (ii) it wasn't an isolated case: lots of uses of terms in contemporary philosophy might share the relevant features of DIUs' use of 'intuitive'. The first of these claims will no doubt be disappointing (all the evidence provided somewhere else) and the second will seem overambitious: I don't outline evidence in

detail, but still make extraordinarily bold and broad claims. I agree with both of these reactions. A central feature of the view defended in this paper is that whether an event is nonsensical depends on details of the history of the expression, the history of the speaker's community, and the mental states of the speaker. None of those facts are discovered through anything like a priori or armchair theorizing. So the approach I advocate differs sharply from Carnap's: he thought more or less all of Western philosophy could be discovered to be nonsensical without any detailed study of any particular linguistic practices. That strategy is hopeless. Those in search of nonsense might be looking for the presence or absence of different features (maybe because they favor different theories of meaning or because they have different pre-theoretic assumptions about what constitutes linguistic failure and success, or because they interpret my diagnostics in ways different from how I do[25]), but they all have to look carefully at data about linguistic practices. As a result, to establish in any serious way that even one particular use of an expression instantiates nonsense requires a lot of evidence. The goal of this paper is to present a general framework for thinking about nonsense and to make plausible that we will find pockets of nonsensical speech in many domains. To conclusively establish this will require a separate paper for each case.[26]

Verbal Disputes as a Source of Nonsense

With those reservations in mind, I will boldly continue to sketch a strategy for how to discover nonsense of the same kind as that found in connection with 'intuitive'. Those conditions (i.e. the conditions that I claim generate nonsensical uses of 'intuitive') can often be found in the vicinity of what David Chalmers (2011) calls "verbal disputes". Recall the relevant general features that I claimed deferential 'intuition' users instantiate:

i.   The speaker is a member of a number of distinct subcommunities in which E is used in significantly different ways;
ii. The speaker is unaware of (i); and
iii. The speaker defers to the use it has in 'the community' without any particular sub-community in mind and with (broadly speaking) causal connection to a multiplicity of communities.

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[25] The central phenomena I appeal to—introductions, transmissions and deference—can all be construed in different ways. What ends up being nonsense will depend in large part on the details of a theory of these phenomena.

[26] A full exploration of nonsense would need to address the connection between nonsense, on the one hand, and vagueness and indeterminacy, on the other. Both vagueness and indeterminacy are controversial topics and so drawing the line between nonsense and these phenomena will depend on complex theoretical choices. Some cases should clearly not be classified as indeterminacy or vagueness (e.g. the use of 'Bob' in the first illustration above (I also think Evans' middle period is unlikely to be well described in that way). A clear line can be drawn only once one has settled on theories of vagueness or indeterminacy. I hope to elaborate on how those lines should be drawn in later work.

If this is the situation, then, for reasons given above, we're likely to encounter nonsense. Here is the connection to verbal disputes: If a term E is involved in massive verbal disputes in a community, then condition (i) above is present (on one construal of 'verbal dispute', it is definitional that when we have massive verbal disputes involving E, then E is used with many distinct meanings, more on which below), and there are most likely speakers satisfying (ii) and (iii).

Of course, this will be evidence of widespread nonsense only if there's evidence of widespread verbal disputes. Again, we encounter a topic on which there is a lot to be said, and so much of what I have to say in what follows will be somewhat programmatic and conditional on endorsement of a certain view of verbal disagreement. I take my inspiration from David Chalmers (2011) though he fails to recognize how widespread the phenomenon is. To see how and why I think Chalmers' view needs to be amended, a brief digression on Chalmers' view is necessary. At first glance it might seem that Chalmers is a proponent of the view that contemporary philosophy suffers from widespread verbal disputes. Here is a striking passage from Chalmers' paper:

> In the Socratic tradition, the paradigmatic philosophical questions take the form "What is X?" These questions are the focus of many philosophical debates today: What is free will? What is knowledge? What is justification? What is justice? What is law? What is confirmation? What is causation? What is color? What is a concept? What is meaning? What is action? What is life? What is logic? What is self-deception? What is group selection? What is science? What is art? What is consciousness? (531-2)

He goes on to say that "I think that the philosophical literature over almost all of the questions in the last paragraph is beset by verbal disputes, in a fashion that is occasionally but too rarely recognized" (532, n. 13). This all sounds good. Huge chunks of these debates are, in Chalmers' words, "pointless" (537) because verbal. If he is right, this is a broad and damning evaluation of large swaths of contemporary philosophy.[27] However, it turns out that what Chalmers means by 'verbal dispute' is different from what one would naturally take it to mean (and different from what I have in mind). Here is what I take to be a very a good stab in the right direction (following Chalmers (520) I call this a "narrowly verbal dispute"):

> S expresses distinct propositions p and q for the two parties, so that one party asserts p and the other denies q, and the parties agree on the truth of p and q. (Chalmers 2011, 519)

According to Chalmers, this definition is too narrow, since he also wants to capture

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[27] The charge is almost (but only almost) as serious as Carnap's because for Chalmers, verbal disputes are essentially pointless.

cases where the following three conditions obtain:

 i. *E* has a unique meaning in the community.
 ii. Two speakers, *A* and *B*, are both deferential to the community meaning.
 iii. *A* and *B* have different beliefs about what *E* means in the community.

Chalmers' idea is this: Suppose *A* and *B* appear to disagree over the truth value of the sentence '*Ea*'. *A* thinks the meaning of *E* is M_1, and *B* thinks it is M_2. They agree that 'M_1a' is true and that 'M_2a' is false—but encountering '*Ea*', *A* says 'True' while *B* says 'False', because they disagree about what content is expressed by '*Ea*' in the community they both defer to. This, according to Chalmers is still a verbal dispute.

This broad sense of verbal dispute isn't good for my purposes since it assumes a shared meaning, fixed by the linguistic community, that *A* and *B* both defer to. The setup excludes the kind of situation I am interested in (where there is *no* communal meaning to defer to). That said, I'll suggest, first, that Chalmers' broad sense of 'verbal dispute' is unhelpful, and, second, that nonetheless the facts as he describes them (putting aside his use of 'verbal dispute') provides strong evidence of massive verbal disputes in the narrow sense and this again provides evidence of massive amounts of nonsense speech.

First, why I think Chalmers' broad sense of 'verbal dispute' is unhelpful: My central concern about Chalmers' conception is that it relies on the notion of 'a belief about the meaning of *E*'. That notion isn't theoretically useful. When a speaker defers to her community about the meaning of *E*, she typically has many beliefs of the form '*E*s are *G*', but those are not beliefs about the meaning of '*E*', those are beliefs about *E*s. I don't think there's an interesting subset of beliefs of the form '*E*s are *G*' that are beliefs about the meaning of '*E*' and a theory of verbal disputes shouldn't require that we be able to draw that distinction.[28]

That said, I think the facts are pretty much as Chalmers describes them and that *if the facts are like that, then we are likely to have massive verbal disputes in the narrow sense*. Here is why: Consider, for sake of illustration, the term 'semantics'. The following are facts about the use of that term in philosophy over the last twenty to thirty years.

> *Facts about 'Semantics'*. 'Semantics' is used in many different ways and some authors are explicit about what they want it to mean. These authors do not defer to the community usage; rather, they stipulate that they use 'semantics' a certain way. Others, equally expert speakers, will use different stipulations. Neither speaker is deferential and both of them are as expert as you can be.

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[28] This is closely related to issues discussed by Williamson (2007, ch. 4; 2009).

Now consider, for example a first-year undergraduate, Sam, who picks up the term 'semantics' from reading introductory texts.

> *Facts about Sam*. Sam thinks 'semantics' has a *unique* meaning in the community. She has lots of tentative thoughts about what semantics is and how it differs from pragmatics, but finds it all very confusing and in need of clarification. She'll say things like 'I don't think reference-fixing rules are semantic rules' and she'll try to think that thought. In so doing, she intends to defer to the community's use of 'semantics'.

But suppose (as is in fact true) that there are at least a dozen uses in the community – and the experts don't agree on one of those being correct. If that is the case, then deferring speakers like Sam are in jeopardy. They are in effect like the DIUs discussed above.

In sum: If you're sympathetic to the idea that there might be a lot of unrecognized verbal disputes, then you are very close the idea that there might be a lot of nonsense spoken by those unaware of the verbal dispute and trying to defer to 'the community usage'. If Chalmers is right, this might put a great deal of philosophical speech in jeopardy, including, but not restricted to, those involving the following terms: 'free will', 'knowledge', 'justification', 'justice', 'law', 'confirmation', 'causation', 'color', 'concept', 'meaning', 'action', 'life', 'logic', 'self-deception', 'group selection', 'science', 'art' and 'consciousness'.

Concluding Remarks: Comparing Nonsense and Bullshit

As Cora Diamond (1981) points out, there are many uses of 'nonsense' in ordinary language. One of them might pick out something in the vicinity of what Frankfurt calls "bullshit" (1998, ch. 10). That is not how I have used 'nonsense' in this paper. Nonsense (as I have construed it) and bullshit are importantly and interestingly different. Here is a helpful passage from "On Bullshit" where Frankfurt compares the liar and the bullshitter:

> It is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth. Producing bullshit requires no such conviction. ... When an honest man speaks, he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose. (1998, 130)

Note that the speaker of nonsense, as I have described her, might care deeply about both truth and knowledge. It is striking that the charge of nonsensicality in the great theorists of nonsense—i.e. Wittgenstein and Carnap—is directed not at the sloppy, irresponsible, uninformed or foolish. The charge is directed at some of the most serious and accomplished thinkers. Neither Wittgenstein nor Carnap claimed that their targets had the bullshitter's disregard for truth. The sources of nonsense explored above (defective introductions, defective chains of transmission, and defective deference) make this particularly salient. You can end up speaking nonsense by trusting those around you. If you care about a topic, you have to learn about it from someone—an authority or a group of experts. In so doing you are often handed, so to speak, linguistics tools and a terminology. You have little choice but to employ it. If the expert community you are engaging with is defective in one of the ways described above, you can, through no fault of your own, end up speaking (and writing) nonsense and having illusions of thought. In such cases, the individual has done the intellectually responsible thing, but nonetheless ends up in a cognitive disaster caused by an irresponsible expert community.

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