

Fourth, I tried to show why rules of usage may be relevant in philosophy. I gave examples of philosophical problems that arise because of what I called an 'entanglement' in such rules. In order to disentangle such confusions, it is necessary to make oneself aware of the ways of talking that these rules capture. This disentanglement process takes place from a purely descriptive perspective: what is important is simply to become aware of the differences between those habits of speech the confusion of which gives rise to the philosophical problem. Whether one of these forms of language use is more 'appropriate' than the other is immaterial to the solution of the difficulty.

## 2

*Rules and Nonsense***2.1. Introduction**

Throughout the history of philosophy, thinkers have accused other thinkers of speaking nonsense. Hobbes condemns the writings of "School divines" for containing "nothing else for the most part, but insignificant trains of strange and barbarous words[.]" Nonsense, according to Hobbes, is "the privilege of absurdity; to which no living creature is subject, but man only. And of men, those are of all most subject to it, that profess philosophy."<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein, Berkeley speaks of abstract philosophical terminology as "that common dangerous way of cheating men into absurdity"; such words, he says, are nothing but "Gibberish, Jargon & deserve not the name of Language."<sup>49</sup> A century and a half later, Nietzsche would repudiate the Kantian notion of a 'thing-in-itself' as a "perverse" and "nonsensical" idea which constitutes nothing but a linguistic illusion.<sup>50</sup>

It was during the first half of the 20th century, however, that this kind of charge became particularly current. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein declared, famously, that "Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but nonsensical."<sup>51</sup> Inspired by this claim, logical positivists aspired to show that the traditional metaphysician, in Ayer's words, "produces sentences which fail to conform to the conditions under

<sup>48</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. M. Oakeshott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), pp. 449 and 27.

<sup>49</sup> G. Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries*, in *Philosophical Works*, ed. M. R. Ayers (London: Everyman, 1993), §696.

<sup>50</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. W. Kaufmann, transl. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), Book 3, §§556, 558, 562.

<sup>51</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1961), § 4.003.

which alone a sentence can be literally significant."<sup>52</sup> From a somewhat different viewpoint, Ryle described the (allegedly Cartesian) dualism between body and mind – a doctrine to which he thought most philosophers, psychologists and religious teachers subscribed – as an absurd mismatch of different conceptual categories.<sup>53</sup>

Naturally, such denouncements constitute only vague gestures towards what is wrong with certain philosophical queries or claims. They may be gestures in the right direction – but, as they stand, they are indistinct and, as such, lame. The philosophers I have just quoted were all aware of this, of course. They spent a great deal of energy trying to specify, all in their own way, the difference between meaningfulness and nonsensicality.

The present chapter constitutes yet another attempt to understand what a philosophically relevant distinction between meaningful and meaningless speech may amount to. Proceeding from discussions of nonsensicality by Cora Diamond, James Conant and Lars Hertzberg, I try to identify certain parallels between what Diamond and Conant call 'the austere view' of nonsense (see below), and the conception of rules and meaning sketched in chapter 1.

I will proceed as follows. In the next section, I give an introductory presentation of Diamond's and Conant's distinction between an 'austere' and a 'substantial' conception of nonsense. In section 2.3, I relate this distinction to different ways of reading Frege's so-called context principle. Thereafter, in section 2.4, I discuss a clear example of how a substantial conception of nonsense may manifest itself in philosophical practice. Sections 2.5-2.8 provide a deeper characterisation of wherein the real difference between an austere and a substantial conception of nonsense consists. In 2.9, I discuss the role of nonsense in philosophy, referring back to the diagnoses of philosophical problems I delivered in chapter 1. I end with a brief summary.

<sup>52</sup> A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1946), p. 35.

<sup>53</sup> G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson House, 1949), esp. ch. 1. Charges of nonsensicality have become less popular in later years. This decrease in popularity is largely due to naturalistic currents in post-war analytic philosophy, and, in particular, to Quine's influential criticism of distinctions like those between analytic and synthetic sentences, and between meaningfulness and falsity. Cf., e.g., Quine (1960), p. 229; R. J. Haack, 'No Need for Nonsense', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1971).

## 2.2. Two Conceptions of Nonsense

In Diamond's and Conant's discussions of nonsense, one of the most frequently cited examples is Carnap's

(1) Caesar is a prime number.<sup>54</sup>

Let me say at once that nothing hangs on using this particular example. Those who find other examples more appropriate – say, 'Caesar is identical', or 'Chairman Mao is rare' – may well think of those instead. In fact, Diamond's and Conant's purpose is not to argue that (1), or any other particular combination of words, is nonsensical. Rather, they try to understand how such charges of nonsensicality might be understood. *To the extent* that (1) is nonsensical – what might that involve? This is the question which interests them, and which will be the focus of discussion below.

Diamond and Conant distinguish between two conceptions of nonsense: a *substantial* conception and an *austere* conception.<sup>55</sup> According to Diamond, the former conception is natural and attractive, whereas merely recognising that there is an austere alternative is quite difficult.<sup>56</sup> Diamond credits Frege with having discovered the austere view, and argues that it was later adopted and developed by Wittgenstein. Conant, on the other hand, is more hesitant towards attributing the austere conception to Frege. He argues that there might be a tension in Frege between the substantial and the austere views, a tension which gets resolved only in the *Tractatus* where, allegedly, Wittgenstein talks of nonsense in an uncompromisingly austere fashion.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Cf. R. Carnap, 'The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language', in A. J. Ayer (ed.) *Logical Positivism* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 67. Originally published as 'Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache', in *Erkenntnis* 2 (1932).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Conant (forthcoming), pp. 12ff., and C. Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in R. Heinrich and H. Vetter (eds.), *Bilder der Philosophie. Reflexionen über das Bildliche und die Phantasie* (Wien: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1991), pp. 60ff. Diamond often uses a different terminology: instead of the 'substantial' view and the 'austere' view, she speaks of the 'natural' view and the 'Frege-Wittgenstein' view.

<sup>56</sup> Diamond (1991a), p. 95.

<sup>57</sup> In fact, Conant makes no definite exegetical claims as far as Frege is concerned. His aim is rather to describe Frege's thought as Wittgenstein understood it, and thereby get a clearer view of Wittgenstein's reaction to Frege's writings. (Cf. Conant (forthcoming), p. 93 n. 24.) Diamond, on the other hand, professes to describe Frege's actual views. As both Conant and

In any case, Conant and Diamond both use Carnap as an example of someone who embraces a substantial conception of nonsense. But what does that mean? Well, a characteristic feature of the substantial conception is that it sees a distinction between two kinds of nonsensical sequences: those which are nonsensical because they contain nonsensical parts, and those which are nonsensical because they contain meaningful parts which have been illegitimately combined. As Carnap puts it, there are, on the one hand,

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.<sup>58</sup>

So, according to the substantial conception, to the extent that 'Caesar is a prime number' is nonsensical, it is so despite the fact that all the individual expressions that it contains are meaningful. Indeed, the idea is that it is precisely *because* of what 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number' mean that combining them results in nonsense. Nonsense arises because these meanings are not attuned to each other; they clash, as it were. Diamond renders this natural line of thought as follows:

"Caesar" is a proper name (or title) of a person, and *that* such-and-such is a prime number can be said truly or falsely only of numbers. We cannot say of a person either that he is a prime number or that he is not. The meanings of the parts of the sentence do not fit together to make sense. [... the] sentence attaches to its subject term a predicate which is unsuitable.<sup>59</sup>

In contrast, the nonsensicality of constructions such as

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Diamond notice, if one is discussing Frege, using the sentence 'Caesar is a prime number' as an example of nonsense – which they both do – is, in a way, unsatisfactory. For Frege himself would have classified the statement that Caesar is a prime number as meaningful though patently false. More suitable examples would have been 'Caesar is identical' or 'Caesar exists'. Cf. Diamond (1991a), p. 96.

<sup>58</sup> Carnap (1959), p. 67. Quoted in Conant (forthcoming), p. 135, n. 142. Of course, Conant and Diamond are well aware that Carnap's views of the distinction between meaningfulness and nonsense changed considerably during his career. When they designate him an advocate of a substantial conception of nonsense, what they have in mind first and foremost the above paper. (Cf. Conant (forthcoming), p. 133, n. 134.)

<sup>59</sup> Diamond (1991a), p. 97. Original emphasis.

- (2) Caesar is frinicious.
- (3) Chzerozets bryme ttiz.

according to advocates of the substantial view, stems from the fact that 'frinicious', 'Chzerozets', 'bryme' and 'ttiz' are meaningless. It does not matter how such meaningless words are combined with other expressions: the result will inevitably be nonsense.

Again, according to the substantial conception of nonsense, what prevents 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number' from constituting a meaningful sentence is not that these words lack meaning. On the contrary, they are supposed to have just as much meaning in 'Caesar is a prime number' as they normally have in, say, 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' and '53 is a prime number'. Supposedly, what makes their combination meaningless is the fact that their meanings do not fit together. In contrast, what makes 'Caesar is frinicious' nonsensical is that one of its constituent parts, 'frinicious', lacks sense.

The austere conception does not acknowledge the sort of distinction between different kinds of nonsense just described. According to the austere view, and *pace* Carnap, *no* nonsensical word-sequence contains any meaningful parts whatsoever. For example, to the extent that 'Caesar is a prime number' is nonsense, it contains no more meaningful parts than 'Chzerozets bryme ttiz'. A nonsensical sequence is never like a car crash, but like a road with no traffic. *Qua* nonsensical, (1), (2) and (3) are on a par: they are, roughly put, nothing but sequences of meaningless scribbles.

At first sight, this may seem like an absurd view. Surely, one wishes to say, 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number' have well-established meanings: the former expression is the name of Caesar, the Roman dictator, whereas the latter is an arithmetical predicate true of any whole number that has itself and one as its only factors. And 'Caesar is a prime number' is nonsense because these two meanings do not fit together.

However, let us consider some problems with this line of reasoning, and thereby indicate why the austere view of 'Caesar is a prime number' and similar constructions is not as absurd as it may initially seem.

To begin with, there seems to be something peculiar – indeed, incoherent – about maintaining, as the advocate of a substantial conception of nonsense

does, that the individual expressions in 'Caesar is a prime number' retain their meanings even if the sequence as a whole is nonsensical. If 'Caesar' has the same meaning as it normally has in 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon', and if 'is a prime number' plays the same kind of role that it usually does in '53 is a prime number', then the conclusion seems to be that, by uttering 'Caesar is a prime number', we *do* manage both to talk of the Roman dictator and to attribute the property of being a prime number to him. In other words, it seems as if the word-sequence does express a determinate (albeit absurd) thought, namely, *that Caesar is a prime number*. But if it expresses this thought, then what remains of its alleged nonsensicality?

This is a hard nut to crack for the advocate of a substantial conception of nonsense. The problem is that his explanation of why 'Caesar is a prime number' is nonsense seems to presuppose that that word-sequence is *not* nonsensical. He argues as if 'Caesar is a prime number' is nonsensical because Caesar's being a prime number is somehow inconceivable or impossible or indescribable. But this means treating inconceivability as if it were an attribute of something that *can* be conceived and described. As Diamond says,

the idea that the sentence is nonsense because of the categories of the expressions illegitimately combined in it is implicitly [...] the idea of their forming a sentence which *does* say something – something which the holder of the natural view regards as an impossibility and which he denies is really sayable at all[.]<sup>60</sup>

Although the substantial conception is marred by such inconsistencies, there remains a temptation to think that it must be adequate. Again, according to established usage, 'Caesar' does mean Caesar, the Roman dictator, doesn't it? And it seems hard to deny that 'is a prime number' does mean the arithmetical property of being a prime number. So, must we not conclude that all parts of 'Caesar is a prime number' are meaningful, and that the word-sequence's

<sup>60</sup> Diamond (1991a) p. 105. Conant brings out this inconsistency in a similarly paradoxical manner, namely, as "the idea that we can so much as try to put a logical item into an argument place where it doesn't fit – the idea that we can have a proposition that has a fully determinate kind of sense but the kind of sense that it has is nonsense." (Conant (forthcoming), p. 41.) Cf. also Wittgenstein's remark that "When a sentence is called senseless it is not as it were its sense that is senseless." (Wittgenstein (1958), § 500.)

nonsensicality can only stem from the fact that the meanings of these individual parts clash?

No, replies the proponent of the austere view. To support this negative reply, he may point out that words do not have a meaning which they somehow carry with them everywhere. *Sometimes*, 'Caesar' does mean the historical person Julius Caesar, but in other cases it means something else, or nothing at all. Consider the following case. Josephine works as a waitress in a salad bar. She has just taken orders, and now she shouts into the kitchen: 'One shrimp, two tuna, and one Caesar!' It seems peculiar to insist that the word 'Caesar', as it occurs in Josephine's utterance, functions as the name of Caesar, the Roman dictator. In fact, Josephine does not seem to use 'Caesar' as a proper name at all, but as a word signifying a certain kind of salad, Caesar salad. And, if 'Caesar' does not mean the Roman dictator in *this* case, why insist that it does so in 'Caesar is a prime number'?

To this objection, the proponent of a substantial conception may respond in different ways. One possibility is to yield to a psychologistic construal of meaning. That is, he may argue that, in Josephine's mouth, 'Caesar' signifies Caesar salad only because Josephine has Caesar salad, rather than the Roman dictator, *in mind*; whereas, when we denounce 'Caesar is a prime number' as nonsensical, we do think of the Roman dictator and of the arithmetical property of being a prime number, and we base our denunciation on the insight that these two notions do not fit together (whatever that means).

However, such an answer seems dubious. To begin with, one might ask how the advocate of a substantial conception can be so sure about what is on Josephine's mind, and also why this is supposed to be relevant in the imagined situation. After all, it would be ridiculous if the kitchen staff started to interrogate Josephine about her inner thoughts in order to figure out whether she really asked them to prepare a Caesar salad or not. Indeed, as far as we know, it may well be the case that, while shouting her order, Josephine was not thinking of Caesar salad at all, but, say, of the quarrel she just had with her husband, or of the coming weekend. Or perhaps her mind was just blank. Or perhaps she was even thinking about Caesar, the Roman dictator. And still, for all relevant purposes, it seems as if the only reasonable thing to say is that, in Josephine's mouth, 'Caesar' meant Caesar salad and nothing else.

The advocate of a substantial view may agree with this, but add that the other case, where 'Caesar is a prime number' is denounced as nonsensical, is different. He may argue that in this latter case, what we have in mind is indeed of central importance. After all, does not the suggested mentalistic account give a quite apt description of what actually happens when we, as philosophers, ponder the word-sequence 'Caesar is a prime number'? We spontaneously associate 'Caesar' with an idea of the Roman dictator and 'is a prime number' with the notion of being a prime number in the standard arithmetical sense. Then we try, in thought, to combine these two notions into a meaningful whole, but find that the result is meaningless. And so, we conclude that the sentence is nonsensical.

The problem is that it is highly unclear wherein the alleged mental clash between the two notions is supposed to consist. Is the inability to combine *Caesar* and *being a prime number* into a meaningful whole a consequence of our limited mental powers? Hardly. After all, the claim is not that a stronger, super-human intellect would be able to grasp what Caesar's being a prime number involves; it is rather that there is nothing to grasp here at all. The model is supposed to show, not that 'Caesar is a prime number' is meaningful though humanly impossible to understand, but that it is meaningless. But how on earth can it show that?<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps we do not have to pursue this mentalistic line of defence any further. There seems to be little hope of finding an illuminating account of what the alleged clash between notions in the mind is supposed to involve. Moreover, the substantial conception of nonsense need not involve such a crude mentalistic view of linguistic meaningfulness. As we shall see, even if a proponent of the substantial view may easily be tempted to embrace one or another form of mentalism, there is no necessary connection here.

<sup>61</sup> Of course, one might try to argue that what we humans count as meaningless is quite possible to grasp for some other, superior intellect. This idea, however, leads to notorious difficulties. In particular, one is forced to explain how we can know that there is anything to grasp, even if we fail to comprehend it ourselves. Conant calls this "the Cartesian Predicament" (since Descartes maintained that there are thoughts we humans cannot grasp but which God is able to understand). According to Conant, Descartes tried to solve the problem by invoking a distinction between what our finite intellect can truly grasp and what it can merely "touch": between *comprehension* and *apprehension*. I will not delve deeper into this Cartesian approach to inconceivability here. For a fuller discussion, cf J. Conant, 'The Search for Logically Alien Thought: Descartes, Kant, Frege, and the *Tractatus*', in *Philosophical Topics* 20 (1991).

### 2.3. Frege's Context Principle

One way of getting clearer about the conflict between the substantial and the austere conceptions of nonsense is to relate it to Frege's ideas about the connection between what words mean and their place in propositional wholes. Those familiar with Frege may already have noticed some apparent parallels between an austere view of nonsense and Frege's so-called 'context principle'. As a matter of fact, Diamond views these parallels as not just apparent but real: she reads Frege's context principle as a more or less straightforward formulation of an austere conception of nonsense. Let us take a closer look at her reading, and contrast it with another possible interpretation, namely, Michael Dummett's.

Frege's statement of the context principle, in *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, runs: "never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition (*Satzzusammenhang*)."<sup>62</sup> Dummett spells out Frege's point as follows:

the assignment of a sense to a word, whether a name or an expression of any other logical type, only has significance in relation to the subsequent occurrence of that word in sentences. [...] a sentence is determined as true under certain conditions, which conditions are derivable from the way in which the sentence is constructed out of its constituent words; and the senses of the words relate solely to this determination of the truth-conditions of the sentences in which the words may occur.<sup>63</sup>

At first sight, this may seem to be in line with an austere conception of nonsense, as I have described it above. This first impression may be strengthened by Dummett's way of contrasting Frege's alleged position with a mentalistic view of linguistic meaning:

<sup>62</sup> "[...] nach der Bedeutung der Wörter muss im Satzzusammenhange, nicht in ihrer Vereinzelung gefragt werden". G. Frege, *Die Grundlagen der Arithmetik/The Foundations of Arithmetic*, transl. J. L. Austin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950), p. x.

<sup>63</sup> M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London: Duckworth, 1973), pp. 193f.

If we commit the mistake of doing what Frege calls 'asking for the reference of the word in isolation', that is, of asking what it stands for in neglect of the fact that the answer can only be, and need only be, whatever is required to give, in combination with rules governing other words, a correct means of determining the truth-values of sentences containing the word, then, in problematic cases, we are likely to come up with an entirely inappropriate answer, such as the image which the utterance of the word has the propensity to call up in our minds.<sup>64</sup>

However, the apparent austerity of Dummett's reading is an illusion. In fact, Dummett's Frege does not embrace an austere conception of nonsense at all. According to Dummett's interpretation, what the context principle says is only that a satisfactory specification of the meaning of an sub-sentential expression consists in a general and systematic account of the part played by the expression in determining the truth-conditions of each meaningful sentence in which it may possibly appear.<sup>65</sup> The meaning specified by such a systematic account is the meaning the expression has *even when it occurs in a nonsensical construction*. Accordingly, we may well ask what, say, 'is a prime number' means in 'Caesar is a prime number'. Supposedly, the right answer to such a question would consist in a systematic account of the part played by that expression in sentences such as '7 is a prime number', 'There is no largest prime number', and so on.

By contrast, Diamond reads Frege's dictum in a more radical fashion:

[Frege] does not merely mean that a word has meaning if it contributes to the sense of any sentence in which it occurs, in accordance with general rules; that is, he is not saying that it is the *general* possibility a word has of contributing to sense that confers meaning on it. That would allow for the possibility of a senseless sentence composed of words which had had content conferred on them by general rules. But what he actually says [...] is that it is through the sense of the whole that the parts get their content, and if this means anything at all, it must rule out the combination: senseless whole and parts with content.<sup>66</sup>

In other words, Diamond reads Frege's principle as saying that the question of what a certain word means should be raised only relative to the word's role in

<sup>64</sup> Dummett (1973), p. 195.

<sup>65</sup> Dummett (1973), p. 195, and (1978), p. 94.

<sup>66</sup> Diamond (1991a), p. 109.

a *particular* propositional context. And if the word does not occur in a meaningful proposition but in a nonsensical combination, it has *no* determinate sense. For example, in 'Caesar is a prime number', 'is a prime number' means nothing at all.

My aim here is not to decide which one of these readings, if any, is exegetically adequate, but to clarify the distinction between the substantial and the austere conceptions of nonsense. The austere conception does not say, as Dummett has Frege saying, that a word has meaning in virtue of some already settled role that that word will play in all constructions where it may subsequently occur. On the contrary, the notion of such prior determination is precisely what the austere conception rejects. According to the austere view, what a word means, if anything, is not settled independently of how it actually functions in a particular propositional context. The meaning of the word can be identified only in relation to the meaning of such a particular whole. And if the word does not occur within a meaningful whole, it plays no significant role at all.

#### 2.4. Carnap and Heidegger

Returning to Carnap will help us understand better what this means. One of his most famous discussions provides a nice example of a line of argument that stands in direct opposition to Frege's context principle, austere read. What I have in mind is Carnap's notorious attack on Heideggerian phenomenology.<sup>67</sup> Both Diamond and Conant raise this as a clear manifestation of a substantial view of nonsense. Let us take a closer look at their comments on Carnap's analysis.

The text Carnap scrutinises is Heidegger's 1929 essay, *Was ist Metaphysik?* One immediate problem with Carnap's criticism is his scissors-and-paste quotational technique. The passage that Carnap quotes is not really a passage at all, but a hotchpotch of remarks ripped from various places in Heidegger's essay. The quotation runs as follows:

<sup>67</sup> Carnap (1959), pp. 69ff. Conant's and Diamond's discussions of Carnap's attack on Heidegger are in Conant (forthcoming), pp. 57ff, and Diamond (1991a), pp. 87f.

What should be examined are beings only, and besides that – nothing; beings alone, and further – nothing; solely beings, and beyond that – nothing. What about this nothing? [...] Is the nothing given only because of the “not,” i.e., negation, is given? Or is it the other way around? Are negation and the “not” given only because the nothing is given? [...] We assert that the nothing is more original than the “not” and negation. [...] Where shall we seek the nothing? Where will we find the nothing? [...] we do know the nothing [...] Anxiety reveals the nothing. [...] that in the face of which and for which we were anxious was “really” – nothing. Indeed: the nothing itself – as such – was there. [...] How is it with the nothing? [...] The nothing itself nihilates.<sup>68</sup>

What is of primary relevance to the present discussion, however, is not Carnap’s mutilation of Heidegger’s text, but the strategy he uses to support his claim that the vast majority of the sentences cited are nonsensical. For it is this strategy which clearly shows Carnap’s commitment to a substantial view of nonsense. Let us have a closer look at how he proceeds.

What Carnap finds most problematic is Heidegger’s using the word ‘nothing’ as a noun in sentences such as ‘We find the nothing’ or ‘We know the nothing’. According to Carnap, these “gross logical errors” constitute mere

<sup>68</sup> M. Heidegger, ‘What Is Metaphysics?’, in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper&Row, 1977), translated by D.F. Krell. The quoted sentences appear at various places between pp. 97-105. The German original runs as follows: “Erforscht werden soll nur das Seiende und sonst – nichts; das Seiende allein und weiter – nichts; das Seiende einzig und darüber hinaus – nichts. Wie steht es um dieses Nichts? [...] Gibt es das Nichts nur, weil es das Nicht, d.h. die Verneinung gibt? Oder liegt es umgekehrt? Gibt es die Verneinung und das Nicht nur, weil es das Nichts gibt? [...] Wir behaupten: das Nichts ist ursprünglicher als das Nicht und die Verneinung. [...] Wo suchen wir das Nichts? Wie finden wir das Nichts? [...] wir kennen das Nichts [...] Die Angst offenbart das Nichts. [...] wovor und worum wir uns ängsteten, war »eigentlich« - nichts. In der Tat: das Nichts selbst – als solches – war da. [...] Wie steht es um das Nichts? [...] Das Nichts selbst nichtet.” (M. Heidegger, ‘Was ist Metaphysik?’, in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1967)) I have used Krell’s translation rather than the one given by Pap in his translation of Carnap’s paper, since the latter shows remarkable defects. For example, Pap seems ignorant of the central Heideggerian distinction between ‘Sein’ and ‘Seiende’, and translates the first part of the quoted passage as follows: “What is to be investigated is being only and – nothing else, being alone and further – nothing; solely being and beyond being nothing.” If one looks at the context in which this sentence occurs, the absurdity of Pap’s translation becomes patent. Heidegger is not describing the aim of his own philosophical inquiry (which may perhaps be characterised as an investigation of being (Sein)) but, by contrast, the aims of science. Science, says Heidegger, gives *das Seiende* – roughly: entities, things – “explicitly and solely the first and last word.” However, it wants to know nothing of the nothing, and, hence, nothing of being. (Heidegger (1977), pp. 97f.)

“pseudo-statements” that seem meaningful only because they exhibit superficial similarities with genuine statements such as ‘We find the suitcase’ or ‘We know the way’. Now, it is of course true that many of these Heideggerian sentences are most peculiar. But peculiarity is not the same as nonsensicality; so, why conclude that they are *meaningless*? Doesn’t it seem much more reasonable to say that, in these sentences, Heidegger quite consciously employs the word ‘nothing’ in some special sense? As Conant remarks,

It is hard to credit the hypothesis that the author of this text has been led astray by the surface grammar of ordinary language; for precisely what puzzles and challenges us in Heidegger’s assertions is their peculiar surface grammar. The disclosure that language is under some extraordinary pressure in this text does not wait on the application of the principles of logical syntax. Heidegger is evidently speaking here in an unusual way: openly forcing his reader to reflect on how his words are meant [...].<sup>69</sup>

Interestingly enough, Carnap does consider this objection – and rejects it. Indeed, his way of rejecting the objection is precisely what reveals his commitment to a substantial view of nonsense. First, Carnap acknowledges that “we might be led to conjecture that perhaps the word ‘nothing’ has in Heidegger’s treatise a meaning entirely different from the customary one,” and he admits that “[i]f such were the case, then the mentioned logical errors [...] would not be committed.”<sup>70</sup> But then, he immediately goes on to discard this possibility, by referring to the fact that Heidegger *introduces* the word ‘nothing’ by using it in a standard fashion, in the sentence ‘What should be examined are beings only, and besides that – nothing’. Carnap writes:

the first sentence of the quotation [...] proves that this interpretation is not possible. The combination of “only” and “besides that nothing” shows unmistakably that the word “nothing” here has the usual meaning of a logical particle that serves for the formulation of a negative existential statement. This introduction of the word “nothing” is then immediately followed by the leading question of the treatise: “What about this nothing?”<sup>71</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Conant (forthcoming), p. 58.

<sup>70</sup> Carnap (1959), p. 71.

<sup>71</sup> Carnap (1959), p. 71. I have altered Pap’s translation a little, in order to fit Krell’s translation of the Heideggerian sentences to which Carnap refers.



In other words, what Carnap argues is that Heidegger's first using the word 'nothing' in a sentence where the word seemingly has its normal meaning proves that the word has this normal meaning in subsequent constructions, including 'We know the nothing', 'Anxiety reveals the nothing', and so forth. Carnap then argues that this normal meaning is such that it does not fit together with what the other words in these latter constructions mean, and concludes that these constructions are mere pseudo-statements.

An advocate of the austere conception of nonsense would have two objections against this way of arguing.<sup>72</sup> To begin with, the fact that a word has a certain meaning in one sentence in no way guarantees that it has the same meaning in subsequent sentences. For example, my using 'is' as a sign of identity in one sentence in no way hinders my subsequently using the same word as a copula. (My first saying '25 times 25 is 625' does not make my later saying 'Carnap is bald' nonsensical.) Hence, Carnap's claim that the first occurrence of 'nothing' in Heidegger's text determines that later occurrences are meant in one and the same way is simply wrong.

To this first objection, a defender of Carnap may respond that, even if it is an overstatement to say that Heidegger's first use of 'nothing' *proves* that he later uses the word in its normal sense, it would be equally unfounded to presume that the first use is totally disconnected from how he employs the word later. Even if a word's having a certain meaning in one sentence does not *guarantee* that it has the same meaning in subsequent sentences, assuming a certain consistency of usage is an indispensable heuristic principle of interpretation. After all, it is not just a coincidence that Heidegger uses the same word, 'nothing', in all the sentences quoted above! Hence, this imagined defender of Carnap concludes, Carnap's reading of Heidegger is still the most plausible one, even if alternative, more far-fetched interpretations are perhaps also imaginable.

This response brings us directly to the second objection to Carnap's reading. Actually, from an austere point of view, the most fundamental problem with Carnap's interpretation is not just that he takes the first occurrence of 'nothing' in Heidegger's text as evidence that all subsequent

<sup>72</sup> Diamond makes both these objections in Diamond (1991a), pp. 87f.

occurrences of the word have the meaning that 'nothing' ordinarily has. The real difficulty is that it is not even clear what it would be for these subsequent 'nothings' to have that ordinary meaning. From an austere point of view, the mere fact that the word 'nothing' occurs in a construction such as 'We know the nothing' is enough to indicate that it does not mean what it normally means in statements such as 'There is nothing in this hat'. Indeed, according to the austere view, unless 'We know' is meant in some exceptional way, the 'nothing' in 'We know the nothing' cannot play the role it normally plays in 'There is nothing in this hat'. There just is no such thing as combining the 'We know' from, say, 'We know the way' (as this sentence is normally understood) and the 'nothing' from 'There is nothing in the hat' (as this sentence is normally understood) to form the sentence 'We know the nothing'. To the extent that 'We know the nothing' is meaningful, at least one of these expressions must have a different meaning from what it has in those other propositions. And if 'We know the nothing' is nonsensical, this is not because the established meanings of the words somehow collide, but because none of the words retain any meaning at all.

Clearly, Carnap's way of treating Heidegger's text conflicts with Frege's context principle, as Diamond reads it. To repeat, according to Diamond's reading, Frege's principle says that what a word means, if anything, is not determined independently of the particular propositional context in which the word occurs. In contravention of this principle, Carnap thinks the meaning of 'nothing' in 'We know the nothing', 'Anxiety reveals the nothing', and so on, is determined independently of whether these constructions constitute propositional contexts at all. In fact, Carnap's conclusion is that these constructions are mere "pseudo-propositions." And yet, he insists that 'nothing' retains its normal meaning in such meaningless word-combinations.

Notice, finally, that Carnap's way of arguing need not be based on mentalist presumptions. He never claims that the meaning of 'nothing' in Heidegger's text is somehow determined by Heidegger's state of mind, or by his private intentions.<sup>73</sup> Even if he may not embrace a psychologistic view of

<sup>73</sup> Both Diamond and Conant maintain that Carnap's discussion reveals that he embraces a psychologistic conception of linguistic meaning. Indeed, Diamond says that Carnap's discussion is a *clear case* of psychologism ('Frege and Nonsense', p. 87). However, this would seem to be an overstatement. To be sure, there is good reason to suspect that some sort



linguistic meaning, however, Carnap shares with the mentalist a common assumption: namely, that a word's meaningful contribution to the construction of which the word forms a part is somehow settled in advance and independently of the word's actually making that contribution to the whole. It is *this* assumption which makes him a proponent of the substantial conception of nonsense. And it is this assumption that the austere conception of nonsense rejects. From an austere point of view, neither some mental act nor earlier usage determines what a certain word contributes to the meaning of the sentence of which it forms a part. As Diamond remarks, quoting Frege: "It is enough [...] if the sentence as a whole has a sense; it is through this that the parts also get their content."<sup>74</sup> Conversely, if a certain word, such as the 'Caesar' in 'Caesar is a prime number', does not constitute a part of a meaningful whole, it simply lacks sense. The psychological fact that, on hearing or reading this peculiar word-combination, we spontaneously come to think of the Roman dictator, is irrelevant; and so is the fact that there are other sentences, such as 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon', in which 'Caesar' does have a determinate sense.<sup>75</sup>

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of tacit psychologistic assumptions underlie Carnap's way of reasoning. However, he does not explicitly characterise linguistic meaning in mentalistic terms. And I do not see why we *have* to ascribe to him any psychologistic presuppositions in order to classify him as an advocate of a substantial conception of nonsense. Of course, one may argue that the use of a mentalistic idiom to account for meaning is only a superficial characteristic of psychologism, and that a substantial view of nonsense constitutes the essential core of the psychologistic position. This means defining psychologism broadly, so that anyone embracing a substantial viewpoint is automatically classified as a psychologist whether or not he couches his viewpoint in mentalistic terms. In the foregoing, I adhere to a more traditional construal of psychologism, according to which a necessary condition for being a psychologist is that one thinks of linguistic meaning in mentalistic terms.

<sup>74</sup> Diamond (1991a), p. 108. The quotation is from Frege (1950), §60.

<sup>75</sup> I do not want to give the impression that Carnap's criticism of Heidegger is representative of the quality of his philosophy as a whole. On the contrary, the level of this criticism stands in contrast to the carefulness and rigour which usually characterizes Carnap's thinking. In fact, the contrast is sharp enough to make one wonder why he allowed himself such laxness in this particular case. In an interesting paper, Michael Friedman argues that Carnap's attack is, to a large extent, conditioned by ideological factors: Carnap's orientation towards internationalist socialism and the *neue Sachlichkeit* movement stood in direct opposition to the neo-conservative, nationalist sympathies which eventually made Heidegger join the Nazi party. Cf. M. Friedman, 'Overcoming Metaphysics: Carnap and Heidegger', in R. N. Giere and A. W. Richardson (eds.), *Origins of Logical Empiricism, Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol 16 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

### 2.5. A Note on Word-Meaning

In my discussion of Diamond's reading of Frege's context principle, I said that she construes the principle as saying that the question of what a certain word means should be raised only relative to the word's role in a particular propositional context. This idea may seem peculiar. After all, it *is* quite possible to ask for a word's *normal* or *standard* meaning, without having any particular *Satzzusammenhang* in mind. This is how dictionaries function, for example. Thus, the expression 'prime number' normally means 'any whole number that has itself and one as its only factors'; 'bracken' standardly means a certain kind of fern; 'Caesar' is normally used to speak of the historical person Julius Caesar; and so on. Is the austere view of nonsense really directed against such talk of what words normally mean?

No, not at all. The austere conception involves no criticism of the notion of words' 'normal' or 'standard' meanings. What it criticizes is the idea that such established word-meanings somehow *determine* whether particular sentences are meaningful, and, if so, what these particular sentences mean. Let me explain this in more detail.

What characterises an advocate of a substantial view of nonsense is precisely that he thinks the nonsensicality of certain word-combinations is the *product* of what the constituent words mean. The idea is that certain combinations are nonsensical because the pre-established meanings somehow clash with each other. It is this proposed explanation which gives rise to the fundamental difficulties with the substantial viewpoint: What does the suggested clash between meanings involve? How can the sentence's alleged nonsensicality consist in its expressing, as it were, a senseless sense? And so on. The real point of the austere conception is to find a way out of this quandary.

Consider the following two claims:

- (i) 'Caesar is a prime number' is nonsense.
- (ii) 'Caesar' means Julius Caesar, the Roman dictator, and 'is a prime number' signifies the arithmetical property of being a prime number.

As long as this is all that is being maintained, *everything is perfectly all right*. (i) and (ii) do not stand in conflict with an austere notion of nonsensicality. The problems arise only when (ii) is used to *explain* (i), that is, when the nonsensicality of 'Caesar is a prime number' is regarded as a *consequence* of what 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number' mean. It is this sort of explanatory claim which forces the advocate of a substantial conception to invoke the characteristic but mysterious notion of a 'clash' between meanings, and which leads him to maintain, incoherently, that 'Caesar is a prime number' and similar constructions express a sense which somehow doesn't make sense.

Conversely, what is central to the opposite, austere conception, as I understand it, is not to deny that there is something like the 'standard' meanings of 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number'. The austere conception is not directed at such a notion of word-meaning, but at the idea that word-meanings, thus construed, can figure in a substantial explanation of why certain combinations of words are nonsensical and some are not.

To shed further light on this issue, let us return to an example discussed in chapter 1. Nora's friend from Paris, Philippe, makes the following remark about one of Nora's poems:

I don't see why you bracken the final stanza.

Irrespective of whether one thinks of nonsense in austere or in substantial terms, one would have to agree that, normally, the English word 'bracken' is the name of a kind of plant. If one advocates an austere conception of nonsense, however, one will not regard this normal meaning as in any way preventing us from saying that Philippe's sentence constitutes a perfectly meaningful comment on the fact that the final stanza of Nora's poem is bracketed. One will simply note that, *in this particular proposition*, 'bracken' functions quite differently from what its normal dictionary meaning suggests. By contrast, if one is a consistent adherent of a substantial conception, then things will appear more complicated. There will be a temptation, then, to say that, *strictly speaking*, Philippe's sentence is nonsensical: for, given its standard meaning, 'bracken' does not *fit* 'I don't see why you ... the final stanza'. And one will be inclined to classify the fact that Philippe nonetheless manages to convey his message as some sort of merely pragmatic side-effect.

This shows how intimately connected the substantial conception of nonsense is with the idea, criticized in chapter 1, that what words can be used to express is somehow settled before their particular employment. An austere conception, by contrast, follows naturally from a recognition of what I called 'the primacy of meaningful expression'. An advocate of the substantial view reasons as if the established meanings of words do not just constitute norms for what is good and bad English, but function as general constraints which settle what those words can be used to express. An advocate of the austere conception, on the other hand, regards this as a confusion of two quite different concerns: the prescriptive one of preserving the purity of language, and the descriptive one of registering how words actually function in real-life linguistic practice.

One of Cora Diamond's most concise formulations of the austere viewpoint is this:

If you look at the words alone, nothing that can pertain to them in isolation will be relevant to what the words do as working parts of a sentence. You may use the word "meaning" in any way you like, but nothing that logically can be a characteristic of a word in isolation can help to explain its meaning in the sense of "meaning" in which what a sentence says depends on the meaning of its working parts.<sup>76</sup>

Here, Diamond distinguishes between, on the one hand, that sense of 'meaning' in which the meaning of a word may be said to consist in how the word actually functions in particular propositional wholes, and, on the other hand, senses of 'meaning' in which one may talk about the meaning of a word considered in isolation (e.g., meaning in the sense of 'normal meaning', perhaps as codified in a dictionary). Diamond does not say that the former sense of 'meaning' is more adequate than the latter. On the contrary, "You may use the word 'meaning' in any way you like." What she does say is that these various senses must not be confused, the underlying suggestion being that the substantial conception of nonsense involves precisely such a confusion. As I read this passage, Diamond's point is that if we speak of the meaning of a concrete sentence as built up from meaningful parts, the meanings of those

<sup>76</sup> Diamond (1991a), p. 98. Note omitted.

parts cannot be separated from their actually making this contribution to the whole. What meaningful work a word does or can do in a sentence is not determined before the word is actually used to perform that work.

Thus, the substantial view wavers between different senses of 'meaning'. The 'standard', dictionary meaning of a word is not adequately distinguished from the sort of meaning that consists in the word's functioning as a part of a particular propositional whole. Therefore, it seems as if once the former kind of meaning has been settled, the latter has somehow also been determined. This tacit and unrecognised fluctuation between different meanings of 'meaning' constitutes the fundamental source of the substantial view of nonsense. At bottom, it is this confusion that the austere view repudiates.

### 2.6. A closer look at the notion of 'propositional context' (I)

Let me sum up what I have said so far about the conflict between a substantial and an austere conception of nonsense. The former conception acknowledges a distinction between two kinds of nonsensical construction: those that are nonsensical because they contain one or more nonsensical parts, and those that are nonsensical because they consist of meaningful parts that are illegitimately combined. By contrast, the austere conception recognises no such distinction. According to this conception, it is best to think of all nonsensical constructions as involving no meaningful parts at all.

Spontaneously, the claim that, say, 'Caesar is a prime number' contains no more meaningful parts than 'Chzerozets bryme ttiz' may seem absurd. After all, both 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number' have well-established meanings: the former expression means the historical person Julius Caesar, and the latter is an arithmetical predicate that is true of any whole number that has itself and one as its only factors. However, this spontaneous objection is off the mark. In fact, the advocate of the austere view might well agree that 'Caesar' and 'is a prime number' have these 'established meanings', if what this means is simply that these are the meanings that the words *normally* have. What he denies is only that these normal meanings somehow explain the nonsensicality of 'Caesar is a prime number' and similarly abnormal constructions. According to the austere view, nonsensicality is not a *product* of a clash between the pre-established meanings of words. The substantial viewpoint is mistaken because it

involves the claim that established meanings somehow determine what job the words perform, regardless of the particular context in which the words figure.

My aim in the remainder of this chapter is to clarify further the content and implications of an austere conception of nonsense. The first thing that needs to be made more transparent is, I think, the notion of 'propositional context'. We must be clearer about what is involved in a word's 'constituting a part of a propositional whole'. In the present and following sections, I will try to shed more light on this issue.

A good place to start is a consideration of an interesting comment, made by Lars Hertzberg, regarding Diamond's account of the conflict between the austere and the substantial viewpoints.<sup>77</sup> Hertzberg notices with approval the austere conception's emphasis on propositional wholes over individual words. However, he goes on to argue that this is not enough, and that yet another, analogous step needs to be taken in order to distinguish satisfactorily between meaningfulness and nonsensicality. Hertzberg claims that, just as an individual word does not have a meaning which it carries with it everywhere, the meaning of a whole sentence may vary from one context of utterance to another. For example, contexts are imaginable where the sentence 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' does not describe the actions of the Roman dictator, but the dealings between a Mafia operator, Caesar, and a crime syndicate known as the Rubicon. Or, one might imagine the following conversation between two judges at a dog show:

A: 'What are the prime contenders in this class?'

B: 'Well, Caesar is a prime number.'

A: 'Which one is that?'

B: 'It's number 53.'

A: 'Yes, you're right of course, 53 really is a prime number.'<sup>78</sup>

In this conversation, '53 is a prime number' expresses a sense quite different from its usual, arithmetical one; and 'Caesar is a prime number' functions as a

<sup>77</sup> L. Hertzberg, 'The Sense Is Where You Find It', forthcoming in T. McCarthy and P. Winch (eds.), *Wittgenstein in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). There are interesting parallels between Hertzberg's paper and J. Conant, 'Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use', *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (1998).

<sup>78</sup> Hertzberg (forthcoming), p. 4.

perfectly meaningful sentence. From these and similar examples, Hertzberg concludes:

a sentence considered by itself may seem to carry a determinate sense, yet in a given context may turn out to carry a different sense, or the sense may be lost. Or a sequence of words that looks as if it did not make sense by itself might turn out to make sense, etc. [...] It seems natural to apply Frege's stricture once more on this level, and say that we cannot speak about the logical properties of a sentence in isolation, but only as it is uttered by a speaker in a context.<sup>79</sup>

What about this? Surely, Hertzberg is right that one and the same English sentence may be used to say different things under different circumstances, and, hence, that considering a sentence "in isolation" is not enough to determine what a word means. The question is, however, whether Hertzberg is altogether justified in accusing Diamond (or Diamond's Frege) of denying this point. In order to support his charge, Hertzberg quotes Diamond's remark that

it is at any rate not obvious that the first word in "Caesar is a prime number" means what it does in "When did Caesar cross the Rubicon?"<sup>80</sup>

According to Hertzberg, this remark presupposes that the latter sentence, 'When did Caesar cross the Rubicon?', picks out a determine use of the word 'Caesar' irrespective of the circumstances under which the sentence is in fact uttered.<sup>81</sup> However, it is by no means clear that this is a fair reading of Diamond's remark. In fact, if one considers what Diamond says elsewhere, it seems more plausible that, in the passage just quoted, she does *not* refer to 'When did Caesar cross the Rubicon?' as a mere 'sentence in isolation', but as a sentence *already used and understood in a particular way*. Consider another, similar remark:

If "Caesar" is defined as a number term, the sentence "Caesar is a prime number" can be regarded as a logical combination of that number term and the predicate term we have in "53 is a prime number" *understood as it normally is*.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Hertzberg (forthcoming), pp. 4-5.

<sup>80</sup> Diamond (1991a), p. 99.

<sup>81</sup> Hertzberg (forthcoming), p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> Diamond (1991a), pp. 101f. My emphasis.

I have emphasized this final clause because it indicates that when Diamond speaks about how words function in certain sentences, she does not consider these sentences as mere isolated word-sequences that can have various meanings. On the contrary, she speaks of these sentences as used to express a particular thought. In fact, she is well aware, and even points out herself, that sentences (seen as mere word-sequences) may change meanings, just as individual words do. For example, she remarks that "Shirley Temple is a kind of drink, although 'Shirley Temple' started off life as the proper name of a person. This sort of thing happens all the time, *and can even happen to whole sentences*; e.g., there is a shop called 'I was not Lord Kitchener's valet.'"<sup>83</sup> Such passages indicate that Hertzberg's objections are misdirected. What Diamond says is not that a word's occurring in a certain word-sequence endows it with a determinate sense, but that what a word means has to do with the function it plays as a part of an already meaningful propositional whole.

This issue is directly related to the well-known ambiguity of the German word *Satz* and its cognates. Hertzberg seems to presuppose that by *Satzzusammenhang*, Diamond means a concatenation of 'uninterpreted' units, a sequence of signs that can be identified independently of what meaning, if any, it expresses. According to this reading, the point of the context principle would be that what a word means depends on its location relative to other words in such a sequence. If this is how one reads Diamond, then her account does seem vulnerable to the kind of objection Hertzberg raises. However, an alternative reading is possible, where the notion of *Satzzusammenhang* is understood in a quite different way. More precisely, this notion may be understood in terms of the conceptual interplay between the meaningful parts of a proposition with a certain sense. To describe the word's role in this interplay is not to state its location relative to certain independently identifiable, uninterpreted elements, but to describe how the meaning of the word contributes to the meaning of the whole *Satz*. Understood in this way, the context principle seems perfectly compatible with Hertzberg's observations that a certain word-sequence may mean different things in different situations, that on some occasions it may even lack sense, and so forth. If the word-sequence means different things on

<sup>83</sup> Diamond (1991a), p. 99. My emphasis.

different occasions of utterance, then what we have are simply different *Satzzusammenhänge*; and if, under certain circumstances, the word-sequence lacks sense, then, under those circumstances, there is no *Satzzusammenhang* at all.

In other words: a *Satz*, in this second sense, is *not* what Hertzberg calls “a sentence in isolation”. On the contrary, a *Satz* is something already put to meaningful use, something that exists only insofar as it is part of living human discourse. Understood in this second way, Frege’s context principle does not involve any distinction between language in itself and language as it is actually used by concrete human beings. On the contrary: thus read, the context principle is in complete agreement with Hertzberg’s claim, cited above, that “we cannot speak about the logical properties of a sentence in isolation, but only as it is uttered by a speaker in a context.”

This comes out even more clearly in Conant’s discussion of the context principle. He spells out the principle as follows:

In order to determine the meaning of a word, according to Frege, we need to discover what contribution it makes to the sense of a proposition in which it figures. We need to know what logical role it plays in the context of a judgment. What we want to discover is thus not to be seen at all, if we look at the mere isolated word rather than at the working parts of the proposition in action.<sup>84</sup>

To clarify this, Conant invokes the Tractarian distinction between ‘sign’ (*Zeichen*) and ‘symbol’ (*Symbol*). Briefly, the distinction is as follows. Signs are identified in terms of their visible or audible design. Symbols, on the other hand, are signs *in meaningful use*, and are identified in terms of this meaningful use. Thus, two different symbols may share the same sign, like the ‘is’ in ‘Peter is 32 years old’ and ‘14 plus 17 is 31’. Or, to employ Wittgenstein’s own example: in the sentence ‘Brown is brown’, where the first word is a name and the last a property word, we have similar signs but different symbols.<sup>85</sup>

According to Conant, in the context principle, the relevant notion of *Satz* “is one of a certain kind of symbol – not a certain kind of sign – something

<sup>84</sup> Conant (forthcoming), p. 20.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. Wittgenstein (1961), §§3.31ff., and Conant (forthcoming), pp. 44ff.

which only has life in language.”<sup>86</sup> According to this reading, identifying, say, ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’ as the merely spatial concatenation of the uninterpreted elements ‘Caesar’, ‘crossed’, ‘the’ and ‘Rubicon’ is not to identify any *Satzzusammenhang* at all. The mere fact that these elements are concatenated in this manner leaves it entirely open whether what we have here is a genuine propositional context or not. As long as we perceive ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’ only as such an uninterpreted concatenation, we have not managed to identify any symbols whatsoever. Indeed, the logical segmentation into sub-propositional symbols need not coincide at all with the spatial division into words. As Diamond suggests, a sequence such as ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’ may even function, not as a logically structured proposition, but, say, as the name of a certain restaurant. Again, the very identification of logical parts is bound up with grasping the meanings of those parts; and grasping their meanings involves grasping the meaning of the whole. If there is no meaningful whole, then there are no meaningful parts either.

In fact, Hertzberg is not unaware of the possibility of reading the context principle in this manner. He even acknowledges that

[t]here is a hint [...] that Cora Diamond would reject [my objection] by invoking a distinction between the perceptible sentence and the sentence considered as expressing a particular thought. Thus, the perceptible sentence ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’ would be expressing different thoughts in the case in which it referred to the founder of Imperial Rome and in the case in which it referred to dealings within the mafia.<sup>87</sup>

As I have shown, there is not just a hint but many substantial indications that Diamond reads the context principle in this way, and that her presentation of the austere conception of nonsense depends on that kind of reading. However, Hertzberg goes on to argue that *even* if this is how Diamond speaks of propositional contexts and nonsensicality, *it does not help*: “this expedient would not resolve the problem at hand, since it would still be true that, as long as the context is not given, one and the same sequence of words might be

<sup>86</sup> Conant (forthcoming), p. 47.

<sup>87</sup> Hertzberg (forthcoming), p. 5. Hertzberg refers to Diamond’s discussion in Diamond (1991a), at p. 110.

thought to express any number of thoughts.”<sup>88</sup> The point is not entirely clear, but on one natural interpretation of this statement, Hertzberg’s claim is that as long as Diamond does not supplement the sentences under consideration with pretty extensive descriptions of a particular situation in which they are supposedly uttered, she has no right to say anything about what meaning, if any, they have. But this seems mistaken. Surely, it is enough to append ‘as normally understood’ to a sentence such as ‘53 is a prime number’ in order to identify it as expressing a certain thought. The fact that this sentence may express other thoughts under special circumstances does not hinder us from grasping and agreeing on what its normal meaning is.<sup>89</sup>

But perhaps Hertzberg is after something else. In the next section, I will consider some further remarks he makes about the relation between uttered words and the situation in which they are uttered. I will spell out what I take to be the crucial point of those observations. This will make clear that, at bottom, there is no substantial conflict between Hertzberg’s position and the one described by Diamond and Conant. At most, Hertzberg might be said to emphasise an aspect of the austere conception which Diamond and Conant do not bring out clearly enough. Hertzberg’s considerations do not supersede the context principle, but deepen our understanding of what it means to read this principle in an austere fashion.

### 2.7. A closer look at the notion of ‘propositional context’ (II)

Consider a simplistic picture of how language works. According to this picture, a language such as English or Swedish involves a set of conventional rules which map words directly onto meanings. For example, there is a rule establishing that ‘Caesar’ means Caesar, the Roman dictator. According to this rule, ‘Caesar’ means the Roman dictator, irrespective of whether the word occurs in ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’, ‘Caesar is a prime number’ or ‘One shrimp, two tuna, and one Caesar!’.

<sup>88</sup> Hertzberg (forthcoming), p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> This point is perfectly analogous to the point made in section 2.5 about the ‘normal’ meanings of words. An advocate of the austere viewpoint is in no way hindered from talking about the normal meaning of words, or of the normal meaning of whole sentences.

According to one reading, Frege’s context principle does not involve a radical break with this simplistic picture, but only a modification of it. Thus read, the context principle does not abandon the notion of rules that connect independently identifiable elements with meanings. What the principle claims is only that this mapping procedure is more complicated than described above. Supposedly, the rules take into account not just the word itself (as an instance of a certain orthographic or phonological design), but also its location relative to other words. Hence, the putative rules are such that, in English, ‘Caesar’ may mean different things in ‘Caesar crossed the Rubicon’ and ‘Caesar is a prime number’. Indeed, the rules may even yield that, in the latter sequence, ‘Caesar’ lacks meaning altogether.

This is how Diamond’s reading of the context principle must be construed if the observation that one and the same word-sequence may be used to say different things in different situations is to constitute a viable objection against her position. Given this (false) interpretation of Diamond’s position, how should one understand the claim that her emphasis on sentential context is a step in the right direction, and that what needs to be done is only, in Hertzberg’s words, “to apply Frege’s stricture once more at this level, and say that we cannot speak about the logical properties of a sentence in isolation, but only as uttered by a speaker in a context”? Well, on one natural reading, what is suggested here is a further modification of (rather than a fundamental break with) the original, simplistic picture sketched above. According to this further modification, the meaning of a word depends not just on the word itself (as the simplistic picture claims); nor does it depend merely on the word itself, together with its location in a sequence of other words (as, allegedly, Diamond claims); rather, it depends on the word itself, together with its location in a word-sequence, *plus certain features of the situation in which the word-sequence is uttered*. Supposedly, the rules of language are such that they allow us to draw conclusions about what words mean only if all these factors are taken into consideration.

At first glance, Hertzberg seems to argue only for such a further modification. However, as we shall soon see, this first impression is wrong. In fact, Hertzberg’s position is more subtle and also more radical. Before looking closer at his radical viewpoint, however, let us consider a possible objection to the sort of modified position just described. This objection is analogous to

Hertzberg's criticism of what he takes to be Diamond's position. More precisely, just as Hertzberg pointed out that one and the same sequence of English words can mean different things in different circumstances of utterance, one might argue that no matter how many such circumstances are taken into account, and no matter how carefully those circumstances are described, one can always imagine two situations where English is spoken, where all those specified circumstances are present, and where identical word-sequences are uttered, but where, nonetheless, the uttered words differ in meaning. If this is true, then the idea of rules that allow us to deduce what a word means from premises describing its place in a word-sequence as well as features of the situation in which it is uttered, is, of course, hopeless. No matter how many features these rules take into account, we can always imagine two situations which have all these features in common, but where similar English words occurring in similar sequences express different meanings.

As an example, consider again Josephine, who works as a waitress in a salad bar. Apparently, the 'Caesar' in her order, 'One shrimp, two tuna, and one Caesar!', signifies Caesar salad. However, further details about the situation are imaginable which would presumably change this verdict. For example, suppose that the salad bar does not have Caesar salad on the menu, but serves, as its own speciality, a kind of pie which looks like Caesar's (the Roman dictator's) head in profile. In that case, it seems plausible that Josephine's order refers, not to Caesar salad, but to this sort of pie. But again, this is not definitive. One may imagine that other features of the situation turn out to be relevant. Suppose, for example, that the guest in question is an old regular customer who use to get Caesar salad, despite the fact that there isn't any on the regular menu. Or, imagine that one of the waiters at the bar is named 'Caesar', and that the guests from whom Josephine has taken orders are three eccentric ladies who are notorious among the staff for always insisting on being served by Caesar. If so, Josephine's 'One shrimp, two tuna, and one Caesar!' may mean that Caesar, the waiter, should serve the ladies one shrimp salad and two tuna fish salads. And so on and so on and so on; presumably, new such details are always imaginable.

As a second example, consider the word 'bumpy', as it occurs in the sentence,

The road is bumpy.

What 'bumpy' means here may vary. Roads considered bumpy for the purposes of bicycle races may be considered smooth for the purpose of driving a tank. Now, imagine such a road, too bumpy for a bicycle race but a pleasure to drive on if you are riding in a tank (say, an ordinary forest road in the northern part of Sweden). Imagine further two army officers planning a manoeuvre. One of them, while pointing at the above road on a map, says: 'Perhaps the tank can advance along this route'. The other answers, 'Well, that's a bumpy road'. At first sight, it may seem obvious that, in this context, the meaning of 'bumpy' is such that this answer is false. After all, was it not part of the example that, given the purpose of driving a tank, the road is to be considered smooth rather than bumpy? On second thought, however, the meaning of 'bumpy' may seem less obvious. For further details about this particular scenario are conceivable which may change the picture entirely. Assume, for example, that the tank in question carries some sort of load that is extremely sensitive to vibrations (say, some special explosive or chemical substance); or, suppose that some vital part of this particular tank is damaged in a way that makes its functioning depend on the avoidance of all kinds of shaking and jolting; and so on. Generally speaking, it seems as if all sorts of details about the situation may turn out to be relevant. Indeed, it seems plausible that this list of possibly relevant details is open-ended. If it is, then the dream of there being rules that allow us to derive what 'bumpy' means on a particular occasion of utterance must of course remain a dream, no matter how many contextual parameters such rules take into account.<sup>90</sup>

Let us recapitulate. First, we considered a simplistic view of how language works, according to which rules map words straightforwardly onto meanings. Against this simplistic picture, it was argued that a word's meaning may vary, depending on the word's location relative to other words. To accommodate this

<sup>90</sup> This sort of point has been argued in several papers and books by Charles Travis. Cf. e.g., 'On What Is Strictly Speaking True', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 15 (1985): 187-229; 'Pragmatics', in B. Hale and C. Wright (eds.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 87-107, at p. 93. For a discussion of Travis's philosophy of language, and for more examples like those given above, cf. M. Gustafsson, 'Meaning, Saying, Truth', in M. Gustafsson and L. Hertzberg (eds.), *The Practice of Language* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, forthcoming).



objection, an alternative, modified version of the original view was proposed, according to which the rules are such that the meaning of the word depends not just on the word itself, but also on its having a certain place in a certain word-sequence. This modified view was also criticised, however, in an analogous fashion: it was argued that identical English words located within identical English word-sequences may have different meanings under different circumstances of utterance. Hence, an even more complicated theory emerged, according to which the rules of language make the meaning of a word depend on (i) the word itself, (ii) the word's location in a word-sequence, and (iii) certain features of the particular situation in which the word is used. It was found that even this last suggestion as to how the meanings of words can be derived seems susceptible to a similar objection – namely, that no matter how many circumstances are taken into consideration, we can always imagine two (or more) situations where all these circumstances are present, and where identical words located at the same place in identical word-sequences are uttered, but where those words nonetheless differ in meaning.

But *mustn't* we conceive of meaning as something onto which words are mapped by rules, the application of which does not presuppose that we already know what is being said? Perhaps not. Perhaps an alternative stance is conceivable, one that does not merely complicate the alleged mapping procedure by invoking parameters such as the word's location relative to other words, or the circumstances of utterance, but which abandons, radically, the very notion of meaning as something onto which words are mapped by rules.

In fact, what Hertzberg proposes is precisely such a radical abandonment. He writes:

it may be important to get clear about the sort of difference considering the utterance in its context makes. It does not simply mean that we enlarge the number of factors taken into consideration in establishing the sense of an utterance, as though the sense were a function of a determinate range of contextual variables in addition to the verbal ones. This would be a misunderstanding, as should be clear from the fact that there is no way of determining in advance what contextual considerations will be relevant to what a person is saying. What we respond to in the course of a conversation, it might be said, is the particular utterance in its

particular context, our understanding of the utterance and our understanding of the context *being mutually dependent*.<sup>91</sup>

To become clear about what this means, consider again the use of 'Caesar'. To repeat, one might say that this word has different meanings on different occasions of utterance, depending on particular features of the situation. It is important to note, however, that this dependence seems to go in the other direction as well: what 'Caesar' means, in a particular situation, says something about the role of certain features of that situation. Indeed, it seems as if the exact relevance of contextual features cannot be specified without establishing what 'Caesar' means on that particular occasion.

Suppose, for example, that in Josephine's salad bar, they do not have Caesar salad on the menu, but serve a kind of pie which looks like Caesar's (the Roman dictator's) head in profile. As I suggested above, this fact might be relevant to how Josephine's 'One shrimp, two tuna, and one Caesar!' is to be understood. However, deciding whether it actually is relevant *cannot be distinguished from* answering the question: What does Josephine's order mean? It is not as if we can *first* determine that, and in what way, the serving of such pie is relevant, and *then* conclude what Josephine's order means. Rather, determining what the order means *is* to determine what role the fact that such pie is served plays in the imagined situation.

Generally put, Hertzberg proposes a viewpoint from which the relation between meaning and circumstances of utterance is not seen as functional or external. Grasping the significance of such circumstances and understanding the uttered words do not constitute two distinct acts. Rather, the role of the circumstances is conceived as an integral part of the word's meaning. From this perspective, to understand what words mean is not to figure out something according to certain rules. Rather, it is to be at home in the situation where the words are actually used. Recognising the significance of contextual features of the specific situation *is* to grasp what the words express.<sup>92</sup>

In other words, Hertzberg renounces the notion of mechanically applicable rules that have the form of functions taking, as input, some independently isolated features of the situation in which utterances are made,

<sup>91</sup> Hertzberg (forthcoming), p. 5. My emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> This point is explored in considerable detail in Segerdahl (1996).

and delivering, as output, the meanings of the utterances. Rather, he argues that descriptions of the relation between the meanings of words and the circumstances in which the words are uttered will inevitably assume a circular character: specifying that and how certain circumstances are relevant for what uttered words mean already involves specifying what is being said.

A corollary of this is that the nonsensicality of uttered words can never depend, functionally, on the circumstances of utterance. To conceive certain circumstances of utterance as *making* the words nonsensical is to conceive them as significant for what the word does or does not say; whereas a consequence of Hertzberg's conception is that if uttered words are nonsensical, then the facts of the situation in which they are uttered must also be deprived of all significance. Consider the following passage from Wittgenstein, quoted by Hertzberg:

You say to me: "You understand this expression, don't you? Well then – I am using it in the sense you are familiar with." – As if the sense were an atmosphere accompanying the word, which it carried with it into every kind of application.

If, for example, someone says that the sentence "This is here" (saying which he points to an object in front of him) makes sense to him, then he should ask himself in what special circumstances this sentence is actually used. There it does make sense.<sup>93</sup>

As I understand Hertzberg's conception of this example, it would be misleading to say, e.g., that a philosopher's pointing to an object that stands right in front of him and is clearly visible to all his auditors, somehow *makes* his words 'This is here' meaningless. This is misleading because it sounds as if the words have some kind of pre-established sense that is somehow made senseless by the circumstances; as if there occurred a clash between this pre-established sense and the significance of the circumstances: a clash resulting in nonsense. But Hertzberg's claim is rather that, to the extent that the philosopher is speaking nonsense, the gesture and the object are just as insignificant as the words. The utterance, the gesture and the object are all semantically adrift; the philosopher could just as well have, say, scratched his nose and uttered 'Blublbla'.

<sup>93</sup>Wittgenstein (1958), §117.

In other words, Hertzberg's view of the interplay between words and circumstances of utterance are perfectly analogous to the austere view of the interplay between the parts of a *Satzzusammenhang*. Just as the austere view claims that nonsensical word-sequences are better seen as involving no meaningful parts at all, Hertzberg claims that neither words nor any circumstance of utterance play a significant role in cases where a nonsensical utterance is made.

When Hertzberg speaks of the importance of taking into consideration the situation in which words are used, his point is not just to say that the connection between words and what they mean is much more complicated than philosophers usually assume. Rather, he invites us to make a radical break with the very idea that this connection consists in any kind of external mapping of words onto meanings. From the perspective he suggests, what can be formulated are not rules determining the meaning of words that are not already understood, but only circular descriptions of how words and circumstances of utterance contribute to what is being said.

What I want to point out, and what Hertzberg may fail to recognise clearly, is that *this radical break is present already in Diamond's and Conant's treatment of the context principle*. The point of the context principle, austere read, is that the sort of mutual dependency that Hertzberg sees between the significance of words and of circumstances of utterance also characterises the relation between the meaningful parts of a proposition. According to Diamond's and Conant's reading, identifying the meaning of a word that occurs in a certain *Satzzusammenhang* is impossible without simultaneously identifying the significance of the whole, and, hence, of all the other meaningful words. Identifying the meaning of one word and identifying the meaning of the other words are not two separate things, but one single act. To describe the word's interplay with other words is not to map the word onto its meaning by considering its place in a sequence of independently identifiable elements. It is, rather, to describe the relationship between units the significance of which is presupposed by that very description.

But then, what is the difference between Hertzberg's viewpoint, on the one hand, and that of Diamond and Conant on the other? Is there any significant difference at all? In fact, I do not think so. At most, there is a difference in emphasis. What can be learned from Hertzberg's observations is, in effect, that

the *Satzzusammenhang* need not be limited to the uttered sentence. From an austere point of view, there is no principled or essential difference between words and other things, or between the 'sentential context' (supposedly consisting only of words) and the 'context of utterance' (i.e., the relevant non-verbal features of the situation in which the sentence is uttered). The *Satz* or *Satzzusammenhang* constitutes one single context in which verbal as well as non-verbal entities may function as significant parts.

Perhaps this is not brought out clearly enough in Diamond's and Conant's discussions of the context principle. They both tend to focus on words rather than on non-verbal symbols. Nonetheless, neither of them construe the context principle as implying that the meaningful units of a *Satz* must be words. And no such assumption is essential to their way of distinguishing between the austere and the substantial conceptions of nonsense.

All in all, if I am right, Diamond, Conant and Hertzberg all break with the notion of meaning as something on which contingently meaningful entities are externally mapped by means of rules. In the next section, I will consider what this break involves in more detail.

### 2.8. The Identification of Symbols

The claim is sometimes made that the *Satz* is the basic unit of significant discourse, the smallest piece of language by means of which it is possible to say something. If this is understood as a non-trivial hypothesis to the effect that thoughts are expressible only by constructions that fulfil some independently specifiable criteria of sentencehood, it seems doubtful. For no matter how refined these independently specified criteria are, counterexamples (i.e., thought-expressions which do not fulfil the proposed criteria) will presumably always be conceivable. We often manage to say things by using garbled constructions, or by means of single words; we make use of gestures, glances and intonation; we employ non-verbal things and features of our surroundings; and so on. The variety of expression seems infinitely diverse, and impossible to demarcate by externally imposed standards.

The situation is different, however, if the claim is understood as a stipulative linking of the notions of *Satz* and that of 'saying something'. Then, what the claim amounts to is only that if something is said by means of

language, a *Satz* is, per definition, used. Thus read, the claim is congenial to an austere reading of the context principle. Austerely read, the context principle does *not* say that what a word means depends on the word's place in a construction that fulfils certain externally imposed standards of sentencehood. As long as something is being said, the construction's outward form is immaterial. To recognise what a word means is to see the word as employed in a certain way within a particular expression of a certain thought. Hence, meaning is not conceived as something with which the word is endowed before and independently of its being meaningfully employed. The meaning is not something that precedes or governs the word's being used, together with other verbal or non-verbal symbols, to say something. Rather, the meaning *is* the word's meaningful employment together with other symbols: meaning is use.

Thus, from an austere point of view, linguistic rules cannot endow words with meaning before the words are actually put to use. Indeed, from this viewpoint, it is misleading to say that rules *endow* words with meaning, or that they *govern* their use. To the extent that rules have anything to do with meaning at all, they only describe or embody what words mean. Hence, deciding what rules are in force – or, if one prefers, what meanings words have – is not prior to understanding the particular utterance of which the words constitute parts. Rules of usage do not bring understanding; they presuppose it.

Another way of making this point is in terms of the distinction between signs and symbols. Consider what Conant says about Tractarian logical syntax:

logical syntax is concerned neither with the proscription of combinations of signs nor with the proscription of combinations of symbols. It is not concerned with the proscription of combinations of signs, because Tractarian logical syntax does not treat of (mere) *signs*; it treats of symbols – and a symbol only has life in the context of a significant proposition. It is not concerned with the *proscription* of combinations of symbols, because there is nothing to proscribe – "Every possible proposition is legitimately constructed".<sup>94</sup>

Without subscribing to the Tractarian view of language as a well-determined structure of precisely delimited concepts and definite inferential relations, I

<sup>94</sup> Conant (forthcoming), p. 69. Note omitted, original emphases. The quotation is from Wittgenstein (1961), §5.4733.

would claim that Conant's description says something important about the kind of rules the character of which I try to clarify in the present study. To understand what I mean, consider again the rule,

The length of a musical performance is specified in temporal terms.

This rule does not prohibit any combination of signs. Rather, it describes the use of symbols. For example, it says that there is no such thing as the combination of the symbol 'Tonight's concert is ... long' in 'Tonight's concert is 2 hours 40 minutes long' (as this sentence is normally understood) and the symbol '2 feet 6 inches' in 'This wooden board is 2 feet 6 inches long' (as this sentence is normally understood). To say that there is nothing like the combination of these two symbols is not to say that the sign-combination 'Tonight's concert is 2 feet 6 inches long' is impossible or illegitimate. It is just to say that in this combination of signs, either 'Tonight's concert is ... long' or '2 feet 6 inches' (or both) must symbolise differently (mean something else) than they normally do in 'Tonight's concert is 2 hours 40 minutes long' and 'This wooden board is 2 feet 6 inches long', respectively.

Now, the important thing is that such descriptions of how symbols might and might not be combined do not describe contingent features of the symbols. It is not as if it just happens to be the case that the 'Tonight's concert is ... long' in 'Tonight's concert is 2 hours 40 minutes long' (as this sentence is normally understood) and the '2 feet 6 inches' in 'This wooden board is 2 feet 6 inches long' (as this sentence is normally understood) cannot be combined. Rather, to describe the combinatory possibilities of symbols is to *identify* these symbols, to say something about what symbols they are. Thus, there is no such thing as first singling out a number of symbols and then ascribing to them certain combinatory possibilities. Rather, to describe the combinatory possibilities *is* to single out the symbols.

In fact, it is somewhat misleading to speak of 'combinatory possibilities'. This makes it sound as if there are certain conceivable combinations of symbols that cannot possibly be realised. But this is a misunderstanding. It is more adequate to say that one thing that makes these symbols the symbols they are is that nothing constitutes 'their combination'. It is not that combining the 'Tonight's concert is ... long' from 'Tonight's concert is 2 hours 40 minutes

long' and the '2 feet 6 inches' from 'This wooden board is 2 feet 6 inches long' is impossible; rather, there is no such thing as the combination of the 'Tonight's concert is ... long' from 'Tonight's concert is 2 hours 40 minutes long' and the '2 feet 6 inches' from 'This wooden board is 2 feet 6 inches long'. And this is a *platitudinous* characterization of what these symbols *are*, rather than an hypothesis about the prospects of fitting them together.

Thus, in describing the symbols in terms of such combinatory networks, we constantly move within language. We do not pretend to establish or to prove or to deduce that certain words have certain meanings. Rather, we treat the expressions of the language *as already understood in a particular way*. This means that we refrain from ascending to a meta-position from which it would seem possible to interpret a given sentence by means of rules the application of which does not require previous understanding of what is being said. From the sort of austere viewpoint under consideration here, describing what a sentence and its constituent words mean is possible only for someone who already grasps this meaning. And if we do not understand a certain expression, its possible senses are describable in terms of how it might be fitted into the body of language already understood.

Hence, the rules formulated from this viewpoint will not be syntactical rules in the standard contemporary sense of the word, according to which syntax

is the study of the rules that describe what a well-formed or grammatical sentence is in purely formal terms. That is, it describes what a sentence is in terms of rules that specify what sequences of words are permissible. [...] A syntactic description of language is not allowed to use the concept of meaning or any related concept in order to explain what a grammatical sentence is.<sup>95</sup>

Inherent in this modern notion of syntax is a distinction between form and meaning, according to which criteria of well-formedness are possible to specify without taking meaning into consideration at all. Such criteria of well-formedness have no place in the kind of austere conception under discussion in the present chapter. According to this conception, a sentence's being well-

<sup>95</sup> A. P. Martinich, 'Introduction' in A. P. Martinich, *The Philosophy of Language*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 4.

formed can only mean its being meaningful; and a sentence can be meaningful no matter how impermissible it seems from a 'purely formal' perspective.

It would be equally mistaken to think of the rules as *semantic*, as this notion is commonly used today. Admittedly, a semantic description of language is supposed to be concerned with linguistic meaning. It ascribes meaning (reference, truth-conditions, or whatever) to linguistic expressions. The semantic notion of meaning, however, presupposes the contemporary notion of syntactic form. Roughly speaking, semantic statements are supposed to describe how meaning is externally attached to syntactically specified units. Hence, whereas the linguistic rules the character of which I try to clarify are constitutive of the symbols the use of which they describe, semantic principles are contingent truths about already specified syntactic objects. Consider, for example, the semantic statement

'Grass is green' is true if and only if grass is green.

Despite the initial appearance, this statement is not considered a circular truism. Rather, it is typically taken to express "a contingent truth about the English language; it could very well not have been the case that it was grass's being green which made it the case that the English sentence 'Grass is green' is true."<sup>96</sup> In contrast, the linguistic rules the character of which I have attempted to clarify are not contingent in this sense. Again, they do not attach meanings to previously identified expressions, but identify symbols by describing their meaningful use.

In contemporary philosophy of language, syntactic as well as semantic accounts of language are commonly thought of as being made from a meta-position from which the meaningful units of language are first identified 'formally', and then interpreted by means of semantic principles. Supposedly, the application of syntactic and semantic principles does not require previous understanding of the object language. It suffices to understand the meta-language in which the principles happen to be formulated. The perspective on language which is explored in the present study, and which follows naturally from an austere view of nonsense, is quite different. From the austere

<sup>96</sup> M. Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 13.

perspective, identifying the meaningful units of language cannot be separated from identifying what these units mean (i.e., how they are used). To formulate the rules that describe the meaningful use of such units requires that one does not disconnect meaning from meaning-bearer; in other words, that one refrains from treating language as an object-language the elements of which are only contingently associated with their meanings.

Anyone who sees it as his philosophical task to decide whether certain utterances makes sense or not will feel that rules of this sort are quite useless. They serve only to describe already known meanings, or to formulate certain meanings that expressions might have, and cannot be used to prove that such-and-such combinations are illegitimate. One task of this book is to indicate why dissatisfaction with such rules is misdirected, and to question the conception of philosophy that makes one expect rules of a more potent kind.

## 2.9. Philosophy and Nonsense

In a critical discussion of Diamond's and Conant's treatment of nonsense, Lynette Reid argues that the austere talk of combinatory possibilities is no better off than the substantial notions of fit and misfit which the austere conception claims to reject. According to Reid, "[i]t is as though Conant and Diamond are saying that we cannot have category clash because we *cannot* combine or even think we are combining words that do not fit."<sup>97</sup> It is not entirely clear what this objection amounts to. Reid seems to think that an austere account of combinatory possibilities must be understood as a sort of quasi-factual description of how certain independently existing entities can and cannot be combined. As I have tried to explain above, this is exactly the kind of picture that the austere conception tries to avoid. Again, the point of the austere conception is that symbols, considered as working parts of meaningful sentences, cannot even be identified except in terms of their combinatory possibilities.

On the other hand, there does seem to remain a problem here. Consider an example. Suppose my wife and I are going to a concert, and she asks me

<sup>97</sup> L. Reid, 'Wittgenstein's Ladder: the *Tractatus* and Nonsense', *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (1998): 97-151, at p. 122. Original emphasis.

how long it is. I answer, 'Tonight's concert is 2 hours and 40 minutes long'. Now, according to the sort of conception described in the previous section, what this sentence means – what symbols it contains – has to do with the possibilities of using those symbols in other constructions. For example, it is essential to the symbol 'Tonight's concert is ... long' which figures in my utterance that it can also occur in 'Tonight's concert is 45 minutes long', 'Tonight's concert is 3 hours 56 minutes long', 'Tonight's concert is 6 hours 55 minutes long', and so on. This symbol is also characterised by there being no such thing as its combination with the '2 feet 6 inches' which figures in 'This wooden board is 2 feet 6 inches long' (as this sentence is normally understood), or with the '200 pounds' which occurs in 'My piano weighs 200 pounds' (as this sentence is normally understood). And so on and so forth.

In other words, it seems as if what I say somehow *transcends* my particular utterance, 'Tonight's concert is 2 hours 40 minutes long'. It is as if my words symbolise because they are somehow pregnant with hitherto unrealized potentialities of employment. But isn't this a strange picture? In what are these unrealised potentialities supposed to consist? Indeed, how can the symbols exist at all, if their identity is tied to combinatory possibilities yet to be realised? Isn't this notion of symbols highly mystical and obscure?

My treatment of this problem will have to await chapter 3. For the moment, I will leave it aside, and return instead to the point at which the present chapter began: with charges of nonsensicality within philosophy.

As I initially presented the austere conception of nonsense, it consisted in a denial that there exist different kinds of meaningless sentences: those which contain meaningless parts, and those which contain meaningful parts that have been illegitimately combined. According to the austere view, all nonsense is of the same kind, as it were, containing no meaningful parts at all.

Now one might wonder how this tallies with the diagnoses of philosophical problems that I delivered in chapter 1. Consider, for example, my discussion of the query, 'Does time have a beginning or not?'. My diagnosis of this philosophical problem was that the question is, in some sense, empty. It pretends to be answerable, but, if I am right, this is an illusion. Actually, the question is based on a confusion between two quite different ways of using the word 'time'. Hence, the right response is not to give a yes-or-no answer, but to reject the question by pointing out this confusion.

But did I really want to say that the question was *nonsensical*, in the austere sense of the word? Was my point that 'Does time have a beginning or not?' is on a par with, say, 'Chzerozets bryme ttiz'? In fact, wasn't my diagnosis more in line with a substantial conception, according to which nonsense may arise because of a *clash* between meanings? After all, I did talk of a 'wavering' between, and even 'crossing' of, different forms of use. Isn't such talk much more in line with a substantial than with an austere notion of nonsensicality?

In fact, I do not think so. For the austere viewpoint does not deny that there are significant differences between, say, 'Chzerozets bryme ttiz', 'Caesar is a prime number', and 'Does time have a beginning or not?'. Perhaps the most striking difference is that the latter two constructions involve words which play a meaningful role in many *other* sentences; those words have 'normal' or 'standard' meanings that may, in many cases, be found in a dictionary. Indeed, this is why these latter constructions *appears* to make sense, while 'Chzerozets bryme ttiz' is *patently* meaningless.

Again, what characterises the austere viewpoint is not that it denies such differences. What it criticises is, rather, the idea that what words mean in other sentences, or what words 'normally' mean, *determines* or *explains* the nonsensicality of 'Caesar is a prime number' and 'Does time have a beginning or not?'. The rules which capture the words' normal, meaningful employment cannot be used for deciding whether such constructions are nonsensical, or as prescriptions determining how the words *ought* to be used in order to be used meaningfully.

Hence, the diagnoses that I delivered in the previous chapter were actually wholly congenial to the austere viewpoint. Those diagnoses involved no philosophical censorship, nor any attempt to *demonstrate*, by the application of established rules of usage, that the problems under scrutiny are only 'pseudo-problems'. All I did was to describe and distinguish between those habits of speech the mistaken assimilation of which, I suggested, were at the bottom of the difficulties. In those descriptions, rules of usage were not used to *derive* the meaninglessness of the questions. Rather, they were merely raised as reminders.

A diagnosis of this kind is the best we can hope for in cases such as these. There is no superior, more watertight way of showing that questions such as

'Does time have a beginning or not?' do not make clear sense. All we can do is to lay bare the rules in which the questioner has become entangled (according to our diagnosis), and hope that he himself recognises the suggested diagnosis as a correct account of how his perplexity arose in the first place. If he does not recognise this, we might of course try to supplement the diagnosis in various ways, or we might reformulate it in terms that better reflect the questioner's quandary as he sees it. But there is no guarantee that such supplementations or reformulations will be acknowledged as providing the solution to the problem; and, as long as they are not, we have to continue to try to find a more apt description of the structure of the entanglement.

In fact, finding such an apt description can be an enormously difficult task. As I remarked in connection with my discussion of Moore's paradox in chapter 1, one philosophical problem is often bound up with many others. Identifying the structure of one confusion often requires the clarification of a host of other misunderstandings. Moreover, an apt description requires a certain sensitivity to the inquirer's own way of experiencing and expressing his difficulties. Indeed, it is in the nature of things that a mere tabulation of rules will fail to correspond to how the person who is actually entangled in these rules perceives his problem. Hence, a more lively description may be required – a description where a central place is given, not just to rules, but to various pictures and metaphors which the person is inclined to employ in expressing his quandary. Similarly, various comparisons and thought-experiments may play an important role in the diagnosis. My discussion of Moore's paradox in chapter 1, for instance, would probably benefit from being supplemented by more extensive and lively descriptions of what *tempts* us to think that, *of course*, there must be something like the conjunction of 'It is raining in Stockholm' and 'I do not believe that it is raining in Stockholm'.

In any case, the crucial point is that such processes of disentanglement will have to take place within a purely descriptive perspective, where different ways of using language are distinguished without being assessed in normative terms. For nonsense in philosophy is not a consequence of 'incorrect' usage. Rather, it stems from the failure to recognise differences in usage, differences in sense. What rules of usage serve to describe are precisely such differences, and that is why they may help us come to terms with philosophical problems.

### 2.10 Summary

In this chapter, I have tried to shed further light on some of the points made in chapter 1, by considering Cora Diamond's and James Conant's work on nonsensicality. Diamond and Conant distinguish between two different notions of nonsensicality, the 'substantial' conception and the 'austere' conception. According to the substantial conception, there are two different kinds of nonsensical construction: those which are meaningless because they contain one or more meaningless parts, and those which are meaningless because they contain meaningful parts that have been illegitimately combined. According to the austere conception, by contrast, no nonsensical constructions involve any meaningful parts whatsoever. I tried to shed further light on this distinction by considering two much discussed events in the history of analytic philosophy: Frege's so-called context principle, and Carnap's attack on Heideggerian phenomenology. These considerations led to a deeper understanding of the difference between the austere and the substantial viewpoint. I argued that the austere conception consists in a criticism of the substantial attempt to *explain* the nonsensicality of certain combinations of words in terms of the words' pre-established meanings.

I then considered Lars Hertzberg's criticism of Diamond's treatment of nonsensicality. I tried to show that the difference between Hertzberg and his alleged opponents is, to a large extent, illusory. Conant, Diamond and Hertzberg all break with the notion of meaning as something onto which initially 'uninterpreted' entities are externally mapped by means of rules. This break, I argued, constitutes the real core of an austere view of nonsense, and shows how intimately related such a conception is with what I said about rules of usage in chapter 1. Rules of usage do not settle what makes sense, but constitute descriptions of ways of using language. They are different from both 'syntactic' and 'semantic' rules, as these terms are commonly understood today. In fact, the very idea of a meta-linguistic treatment of meaning is incompatible with the notion of rules of usage that is a natural consequence of an austere conception of nonsense. Finally, I returned to the issue of philosophical nonsense. I showed why the sorts of non-normative, descriptive diagnoses of philosophical problems given in chapter 1 are congenial to an austere viewpoint.