

THE ISSUE OF MAKING SENSE

Lars Hertzberg

1. For many philosophers, particularly among those who have found their inspiration in Wittgenstein's later work, appeals to the distinction between what does and does not make sense seem to be an important part of philosophical method. Wittgenstein himself said that his aim was to teach his readers to pass from disguised nonsense to patent nonsense (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 464), and he gave numerous examples of the use of this method. I shall try to argue, however, that it is not clear precisely how invocations of nonsense in philosophy are to be understood. My aim in this chapter is to try to clarify the role or status of such invocations. I shall do so through a discussion of the reading of Wittgenstein's view of nonsense put forward by Cora Diamond.

In her essay 'What Nonsense Might Be'¹, Cora Diamond discusses different ways of understanding the concept of nonsense. She defines and criticizes what she calls a 'natural' view of nonsense, and points to the possibility of a different view, which she says is the one to be found in Frege, and also in the *Tractatus* as well as in *Philosophical Investigations*. Let me briefly recapture her argument. Consider the sentences

(M) 'Scott kept a runcible at Abbotsford'

and

(C) 'Caesar is a prime number'.

On the natural view, the reason (M) is nonsense is that the word 'runcible' has not been given a meaning, hence the resulting sentence, as it were, has a blank in it. In (C), on the

¹ Originally in *Philosophy* 56 (1981), reprinted in *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: The M.I.T. Press, 1991).

other hand, all the words have a meaning, only the meaning is 'wrong': the words just cannot be brought together in this way to make a meaningful sentence. (M) has too little meaning as it were, (C) has too much. Cora Diamond rejects the latter part of this claim, i.e. as it applies to (C). It is due, she argues, to overlooking Frege's principle that we cannot discuss the meaning of a word in isolation. Only as it occurs in a sentence does a word have logical properties. When the words 'Caesar' and 'prime number' are combined in the way they are in (C), this shows that either the word 'Caesar' cannot have the logical properties it has in the sentence 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon', i.e. it cannot be the proper name of a person, or the words 'prime number' cannot have the meaning they have in the sentence '53 is a prime number', i.e. they cannot be arithmetical terms. The sentence succeeds neither in making an historical assertion, nor in formulating a purported truth of arithmetic. But this means that this sentence too has a blank in it, unless we are familiar with some other use of these words that might be relevant in this connection, say, a use of the word 'Caesar' as an expression for a number, or a use of the words 'prime number' as a political term. (See op. cit., pp. 97 ff.)

I should like to express Cora Diamond's point by means of a metaphor: the sentential context, as it were, pushes out any meaning of a word that would make the sentence incongruous, and the sentence homes in on any meaning, if available, that would make sense of it.

The reason we are inclined to overlook this point, she says, is that we fail to take seriously another of Frege's strictures, that of always distinguishing between the psychological and the logical. From the fact that in hearing (C) most of us will automatically think about the founder of Imperial Rome it does not follow that this is what the word 'Caesar' must refer to in this sentence. What the word means there depends on how it is used in the sentence, not on what anyone happens to be thinking about.

Cora Diamond then goes on to say

In Wittgenstein this view of nonsense is in fact developed much more than it is in Frege, and you could put it this way: for Wittgenstein there is *no* kind of nonsense which is nonsense on account of what the terms composing it mean - there is as it were no 'positive' nonsense. *Anything* that is nonsense is so merely because some determination of meaning has *not* been made; it is not nonsense as a result of determinations that *have* been made. (Op. cit., p. 106.) --- I should

claim that [this] view of nonsense is one that was consistently held to by Wittgenstein throughout his writings, from the period before the *Tractatus* was written and onwards. (P. 107.)

In support of this claim with respect to *Philosophical Investigations*, Cora Diamond quotes § 500:

When a sentence is called senseless it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation.

2. I find Cora Diamond's discussion interesting and highly suggestive. The question I wish to raise concerns its application in Wittgenstein's later thought. It seems to me that there is both something right and something wrong in her suggestion that the view which she attributes (rightly, I am sure) to the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* is also to be found in *Philosophical Investigations*. What I would contend, roughly speaking, is that an analogous insight applies there too, but that it has to be expressed in different terms, terms that actually make a great deal of difference.

After that, I wish to take a look at the nature of philosophical invocations of nonsense from the point of view of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, using as an example Stanley Cavell's discussion of skepticism.

It seems to me that considerations analogous to those that might persuade one to reject the natural view of nonsense should also make one doubtful about the possibility of asking whether a *sentence*, taken by itself, does or does not make sense. Cora Diamond says: 'it is ... not obvious that the first word in "Caesar is a prime number" means what it does in "When did Caesar cross the Rubicon?"' (p. 99). Thus she evidently takes it for granted that the latter sentence *is* a way of picking out a determinate use of the word 'Caesar'. But there seems to be no reason to suppose that it is. After all, the sentence 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon' might as well describe, say, the dealings between a mafia operator, Caesar, and a crime syndicate known as the Rubicon.²

² Part of what makes us overlook this may be a peculiarity of the example. Julius Caesar is one of those individuals, like Napoleon or Shakespeare, or phenomena like the weather, that one can bring up at the

Again, if my son has a pet turtle, called Caesar, and I suddenly ask him 'Did you know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon?', he is very likely to think that I am talking gibberish.

Or let us, on the other hand, 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.'

The example, perhaps, is a little strained, but what it seems to give us is a case in which, on the one hand, (C) makes good sense, while on the other hand '53 is a prime number' is not used as an assertion in arithmetic.

The point is that 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.

In fact, there seems to be no more reason for saying that the word sequence 'Caesar crossed the Rubicon', by itself, constitutes an historical assertion, than there is for saying that the word 'Caesar', taken by itself, refers to the founder of Imperial Rome, or for saying, for instance, that the English word 'hand', taken by itself, is a noun rather than a

start of a conversation almost anywhere and at any time without having to prepare the ground for it. If the example had been instead, 'Smith is a prime number', the dependence of what was being said on the context would be more immediately striking. Wittgenstein speaks, in *Philosophical Investigations*, § 117, about the mistake of regarding the sense of the word as an atmosphere that it carries with it into every kind of application. In these terms, it might be said that a name like 'Caesar' comes as close as any word can to carrying its context with it like an atmosphere.

verb. In all these cases, we probably would respond to these linguistic items by classifying them in this way if we encountered them in isolation, but in no case does this fact seem to have anything other than a *psychological* significance.

What I mean by saying that our responses in such a case have merely psychological significance is that calling a response to a word encountered apart from a context right or wrong would be arbitrary (e.g. it would usually be neither 'right' nor 'wrong' for me to think about the Roman statesman if my eye happens to fall on the word 'Caesar' on a slip of paper lying around somewhere). In other words, nothing would hang on our responding one way or the other, the way something will normally hang on the way we respond to a remark made in the course of an actual conversation. (I am inclined to regard this as a tautology. A context, one might say, is precisely that in light of which it matters how someone responds to what is said.)

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. There is a hint, however, that Cora Diamond would reject this response, by invoking a distinction between the perceptible sentence and the sentence considered as expressing a particular thought (p. 110). 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. And what carries the sense is not the perceptible sentence, but rather the sentence-as-expressing-a-particular-thought.

I am not sure whether the passage in which Cora Diamond makes this suggestion represents her own recommendation or is just her interpretation of Frege. In any case, 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 thought to express any number of thoughts.

At this point, 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. This might be thought to render the matter of understanding an utterance viciously circular, but there are no vicious circles here, for in speaking and listening we are not concerned with proving anything. We simply respond to what the other party is saying, and as long as no problem arises, we do not stop to consider whether we got her right. Of course, sometimes problems of understanding do arise, but when they do, there is no general procedure for solving them; rather, the way we go about trying to solve them itself depends on the context.

3. Wittgenstein says, in *Philosophical Investigations*, § 117:

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.

Here, Wittgenstein is evidently drawing attention to the kind of temptation that is involved in thinking of meaning as something psychological. Then he goes on to say:

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.³

Evidently, Wittgenstein is not contrasting single words with sentences here, but words and sentences on the one hand with particular uses of sentences on the other hand.

Consider an example similar to Wittgenstein's. I once overheard the following conversation opener: someone sitting down at a table asked the person seated opposite to him, 'Where are you?', and got the answer, 'I'm here.' Taken in isolation, this may sound like a bit of dialogue from a Marx Brothers film, but we get a different view of the matter when we are told that the setting was a philosophy conference with participants from various

³ 'In diesen hat er *dann* Sinn.' (My italics.)

institutions, and that the interlocutors had not met before. What the questioner meant was 'Where do you teach?' and the answer was one out of a range of possible answers: 'I teach at this place', rather than, say, at Swansea, or Edinburgh, or Illinois.

What makes it the case that this is what the speakers' words meant?⁴ One popular move at this point is to invoke one of Paul Grice's conversational maxims, which enjoins speakers to be as informative as the situation requires. To tell someone whom you know to have normal powers of vision, and who is looking at you in broad daylight, that at this moment you are seated at the table opposite him, would be to violate this maxim (and so, presumably, it would be for that other person to request such information). This is not how we converse. Therefore, when someone utters these words, you must look round for some other way of understanding them.

On this type of view it is true that you *could* have meant the words 'I'm here' as a report of your current whereabouts, and in this case too, you would have managed to say something true. (*It is there* to be said, it will be claimed, even if no one would ever actually say it.) Perhaps it will even be claimed that this was what your words 'literally' meant. Now it is true, the argument continues, that if you *had* said this and meant it in the latter way, your interlocutor would be likely to have misunderstood you, since he would have expected you to follow the conversational maxims commonly accepted, and hence he would have been on the look-out for some other way of understanding your words. But this does not alter this fact about the meaning of the utterance.

Now I find this sort of move rather suspect. It seems to be connected with the inclination some philosophers have to distinguish between language as it really is and language as it enters into human intercourse. This distinction in turn is bound up with the philosophical idea of language as a formal system. Obviously Grice's conversational maxims have the effect of protecting the idea of the language system from challenges involving an appeal to the ways in which language is actually used, by suggesting a way of squaring the fact that we would never actually speak in certain ways with the fact that a

⁴ Of course, in view of the description given above, the questioner might have meant any number of things. It is hard to describe a situation in such a way that no ambiguity remains. In an actual conversation, the interlocutors will not normally worry whether they understand each other as long as the talk goes along smoothly. What matters to our present purposes, however, is that it was clear in the context that the questioner was not, for instance, trying to *find* the person he was addressing.

powerful philosophical picture of language entails that it should be *correct* to speak in those ways.⁵

In fact, there appears to be a deep rift in philosophy between those who are inclined by temperament to argue along such lines and those who are inclined to reject this line of argument.⁶

Actually, I would contend, this line of thought depends on the same failure to distinguish questions of meaning from questions of psychology which underlay the natural view of nonsense criticized by Cora Diamond. By *thinking* of a certain application of his words, on this view, the speaker can, the actual context notwithstanding, *make* them mean what they would mean if they were uttered in a different context. But this of course is absurd. Doing this is no more possible than saying 'bububu' and meaning, 'if it doesn't rain I'll go for a walk', to use an example of Wittgenstein's (*Philosophical Investigations*, p. 18).

I think this can be seen the most clearly if we think about the view of truthfulness that a Gricean account seems to entail. Consider the following case: a man is to be fined for a traffic violation. In Finland, the amount of a fine is determined on the basis of the combined incomes of spouses. When the highway patrolman asks him whether his wife is working, he tells him she is not - which of course (given that these claims are not routinely checked) brings down the amount of the fine - justifying this lie to himself by pretending that the question meant: 'Is she at work right now?'⁷ On the Gricean account the man is speaking the truth since he is thinking the truth, he is simply violating a conversational maxim. (This brings to mind the doctrine of mental reservation said to have been adopted by Jesuits.)

⁵ For an incisive criticism of this view of language, see Pär Segerdahl's dissertation *Language Use: A Philosophical Investigation into the Basic Notions of Pragmatics* (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1996).

⁶ Cp. Paul Grice, 'Prolegomena', in his *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. p. 17.

⁷ Again, of course, our description of the example does not exclude the possibility that that was what the policeman was actually asking about, and hence the man may have been speaking the truth. My point is simply that he cannot make his assertion true simply by *thinking* of a context in which those words could be used to make a true assertion.

Now this seems clearly wrong: rather than excusing the reply, this subterfuge could be considered an aggravating circumstance, since it combines the lie with a fraudulent admission of the demand for truthfulness (the man lies to himself as well as to the police).⁸

The only way out for a defender of the literalist view of language, it seems, is to claim that the notion of truth used here has no direct connection with *speaking* the truth. But this response would reinforce the impression that the philosophical idea of language as a formal system is an artifact which is not intended to have the power to illuminate the human use of language (although Grice, for instance, claimed that that was what he wanted to do).

Now, by a line of argument *analogous* to that adopted by Cora Diamond, it could be said that the circumstances, in the exchange imagined above, exclude taking the remark 'I'm here' as a way of letting the other person know where one is seated. And in the same way, the situation in which a traffic citation is being written out, in conjunction with the Finnish penal system, excludes taking the question, 'Is your wife working?' as an inquiry about her activity at the moment of speaking. Using the image I suggested before, we could say that the irrelevant interpretation is 'pushed out' by the circumstances.

It should be emphasized that these are clear and unambiguous observations pertaining to the linguistic character of the utterances as made in the situations we have imagined. They are not just points of psychology, speculations about the associations speakers might be inclined to get from various utterances in various contexts. In fact the shoe is on the other foot: as we saw, it is only by taking a psychological view of meaning that we could hold on to the notion that the meaning of what we say is, or could be, independent of context, as it is taken to be on the 'literalist' view.

If this line of argument is acceptable, then, it means that questions about the sense of a sentence are only to be asked about sentences as used by particular speakers on particular occasions. Where does this leave philosophers' appeals to what does and does not make sense?

⁸

It is an interesting aspect of our attitude to language that we should be open to this kind of self-deception, i.e. in the case of a lie we may think it an extenuating circumstance that our words could, given the right sort of context, have been construed as true. We are, it might be said, inclined to give the form of words an importance of its own (consider, too, the use of language in making up riddles, which often rely on taking words in an outrageously 'literal' sense). Obviously, the fact that we relate to language in this and similar ways provides the soil for the philosophical idea of a dichotomy between language as a system and language as actually used.

4. I wish to approach this question in a roundabout way, by taking a look at a discussion about skepticism involving Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell and Marie McGinn.

Marie McGinn, in her book *Sense and Certainty*, quotes the following remark from *On Certainty*:

I know there is a sick man lying here? Nonsense! I am sitting at his bedside, I am looking attentively at his face. - So I *don't know* it, then, that there is a sick man lying here? Neither the question nor the assertion makes sense. Any more than the assertion 'I am here', which I might yet use at any moment, if suitable occasion presented itself ... And 'I know there is a sick man lying here', used in an *unsuitable* situation, seems not to be nonsense but rather seems matter-of-course, only because one can fairly easily imagine a situation to fit it.⁹

McGinn takes Wittgenstein's point to be this: utterances like '(I know) there's a sick man lying here' or 'I'm here', may sometimes be used to convey genuine information and sometimes not. They fail to convey genuine information in cases in which what they say is obvious. In these cases, uttering these sentences is nonsense. She says that Wittgenstein uses this point as an argument against the skeptic, taking it to show that what the skeptic is concerned to deny are claims that could not even be meaningfully made.

However, she does not consider this a good argument. For it is open to the skeptic to retort that 'the implication that one is saying something that could, in the context, be genuinely informative is one that can be cancelled without any misuse of the language' (ibid.).

⁹ Marie McGinn, *Sense and Certainty: A Dissolution of Scepticism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 108. The remark quoted is § 10 in *On Certainty*. I follow McGinn's translation. The first italics are mine.

On this score, she claims to disagree with Stanley Cavell, who in her view lays too much stress on such an appeal to the obvious in his discussion of Wittgenstein and skepticism in *The Claim of Reason*.¹⁰

It seems clear to me, however, that this is not the only way in which Wittgenstein's remark can be read. What makes a situation suitable or unsuitable for saying 'I'm here' is not necessarily a matter of what is *obvious*. Sometimes (as in the conversation described a little while ago) the words 'I'm here' are used to exclude some other alternative (say, 'I teach at Illinois', or, 'I'm sitting over there in the back', telling someone where I have reserved a seat in the refectory). But even in the cases in which they are not used to exclude any alternative, they may still make sense. Thus, if I see a friend scouting the refectory for where I'm sitting, I may call out, 'I'm over *here*.' Or, having hurried to the opera where my wife is waiting impatiently with the tickets, I may call out to her, '*Now* I'm here.' Or, having gone through a long story about my narrow escape from death in a serious illness, I may conclude by saying, 'Well, here I am today.'

In none of these latter cases could the words convey any information to an audience. They are not used here to exclude an alternative. If we tried to unpack the sentence 'I'm here' by comparing it with other sentences in which these words occur, what we would come up with might be something like, 'the person who is now speaking is now at the place at which he is speaking'. Such a sequence of words, of course, could *never* convey *information* since in order to avail themselves of what it is saying the audience would already have to know what it is trying to tell them. And yet what we would be doing in producing these utterances in these situations may clearly be intelligible. Perhaps it could be said that in all these cases we are *drawing attention* to a fact, though the significance of doing that, in turn, is dependent on the particular circumstances in each case. In other words, the situations we have imagined are what Wittgenstein might have called suitable situations for uttering the words 'I'm here', but what makes them suitable is not the fact that what is being said is not, as it were, obvious.

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford University Press, 1979), esp. pp. 204-221. It should be mentioned that Cavell is not discussing *On Certainty*.

5. In fact, for Wittgenstein to have made the point that to say 'I'm here' in an unsuitable situation is meaningless because obvious would not have been wrong so much as incoherent. In order to judge that a certain claim is obvious, I should evidently have to understand the claim. The paradox is this: it appears that we should have to understand what the speaker is saying in order to realize that we don't understand what he is saying. Of course, if an utterance makes no sense there is nothing there *to* understand, nothing that could be either obvious or not obvious. We are constantly tempted to overlook the remark by Wittgenstein that Cora Diamond quotes: 'When a sentence is called senseless it is not as if it were its sense that is senseless'.

Marie McGinn, as we saw, regards such a move as central to Cavell's discussion of skepticism (*op. cit.*, pp. 93 f). She is right in rejecting it, but I am not sure whether she is right in attributing it to Cavell. (I should point out, however, that McGinn is very subtle and that there are many strands to her argument. I hope I am not doing her injustice.) She argues that Cavell avoids the difficulty of having to say that an utterance may be senseless and obvious at one and the same time by appealing to a distinction between what a sentence means and what the speaker means in uttering it. Thus for a speaker to say, 'I'm here' or 'This is a hand' may be senseless because there is no point he could reasonably achieve by uttering it, and yet his words may make sense as a statement that is obviously true. However, this is precisely the sort of distinction I criticized in discussing Grice.

Now Cavell sometimes expresses himself as though this were what he was saying, but the way I read his argument it is not actually dependent on his taking this line. Let me try to explain.

We are inclined to think about the sense or senselessness of an utterance as a matter of its falling inside or outside the bounds of language. If certain conditions are fulfilled it makes sense, if not, it lies beyond the limit of meaningful expression. These conditions have often been narrowly conceived. This is a characteristic of mainstream analytical philosophy, where they have been taken to involve some such thing as the syntax of the sentence uttered, the categorial compatibility of the words, the reality of the entities referred to, the verifiability of the resulting statement, or the like. In other cases, they have been thought of more widely, as involving, say, the fact that an utterance succeeds in making a point, or the fact that some rational goal can be achieved by means of it. (This last seems to be Marie McGinn's reading of Cavell.) On either view, the meaningful use of language is surrounded, as it were, by a huge sea of gibberish, that is, possible but

meaningless combinations of words: depending on one's philosophical convictions these would either be ill-formed formulae, category mistakes, remarks about unreal objects, unverifiable assertions, or pointless utterances.

Now I do not believe that this picture is involved in the point Cavell is making. What follows from the *obviousness* of what someone is saying (or maybe we should rather say: from its obviousness being obvious to all parties concerned) is not that it makes no sense, but simply that it cannot be understood as a way of *telling* anybody anything, i.e. as an attempt to convey information otherwise not available to an audience.¹¹ No suggestion is being made here about the utterance falling outside the bounds of *language*, it is simply that, whatever the speaker may be doing with his words, it must at any rate be something other than *this*. Once more we see an application for Cora Diamond's point: this way of taking the utterance is 'pushed out' by the circumstances. Whether we know how to take it or not, *this* is not a way in which it *can* be taken.

In other words, when Wittgenstein suggests that the circumstances are not 'suitable' to the uttering of certain words, what he ought rather to have said is that they exclude taking the words in a certain way. The point is not that this utterance ought to have been made in another context, but that it cannot be made here *as* the kind of utterance it might have been if it had been made in that other context. (In fact, Wittgenstein's way of formulating the point at *Philosophical Investigations*, § 117 is superior in this respect.)

Actually, it is only to the extent that we understand how someone's utterance is to be taken that we can tell how the words contained in it are to be understood. Thus, the context of the utterance 'I'm here' will show whether the word 'here' is being used to exclude some alternative place or not. Perhaps we could say: until we know what kind of utterance has been made we do not even really know what sentence has been uttered.

6. Another way of putting this point is to say that it is not so clear in what sense there could be counter-examples to a philosopher's claim that a certain type of utterance does not make sense. It would, I believe, be a misunderstanding to suppose that, if we encounter someone who is using words in what the philosopher claims is a meaningless way, then either the philosopher must be wrong or the speaker must be violating some rule of language. In this connection we might think about Wittgenstein's remark in *Zettel* (§ 320):

¹¹ See *The Claim of Reason*, pp. 208 ff.

if you follow other rules than those of chess you are *playing another game*; and if you follow grammatical rules other than such and such ones, that does not mean that you are saying something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else.

When someone, in a philosophically innocent context, utters words that we find bewildering, the utterance *was* actually made, nevertheless; the situation now is one in which those words have been uttered, and *this* is the situation we have to deal with if we wish to understand what was going on. The speaker may just have been trying to make conversation, or he may have been ironic, or may have been repeating to himself a turn of phrase he had just picked up, or maybe on the other hand he was mispronouncing a word, or was under some kind of misapprehension, etc. Then again maybe he was not really speaking at all, just mechanically coming out with words, or maybe he was insane and thus a speaker only in some attenuated sense. However, we do not reckon his just having violated the rules of language as one possible description of what he had been doing alongside the others, as though that would relieve us from having to deal with what was said.

I am tempted to turn this into a tautology, and to say: unless the speaker was doing *something* in uttering his words, i.e. unless there was *some* way of making sense of what he was saying, then he was not actually *using words* in the first place, hence he was not flouting the rules of language either.

Now the philosopher of course is not the judge of actual conversations, rather in philosophy we discuss imaginary ones. However, it would be a misunderstanding of the philosophers' task to suppose that we should be trying to establish 'what can be said' and 'what cannot be said'. That would presuppose the existence of general rules laying down the sense of utterances in various circumstances, but of course, there are no such rules. What we may end up saying, at most, is things like, 'You can't say this and mean that', or, 'If you say this here, it will come out as something quite different from what you mean to be saying', or maybe even just, 'I wouldn't say that if I wanted to make that kind of point in this situation', such remarks getting their point from the particular philosophical difficulty we

are trying to straighten out. On the other hand, the temptation to express such a point by saying, 'That wouldn't make sense' is a mark of philosophical impatience.¹²

If the philosopher is successful in convincing her opponent, what she succeeds in bringing about, accordingly, is not the realization that there are certain things one is prohibited from saying, but rather that one is no longer *tempted* to say them. Such a result will always, in a sense, be *ad hominem*.

This appears to be Cavell's position too:

... I am in no way hoping, nor would I wish, to convince anyone that certain statements cannot be made or ought not be made. My interest in statements is in what they do mean and imply. If 'cannot' and 'ought' are to come in here at all, then I confess to urging that you cannot say something, *relying on what is ordinarily meant in saying it*, and mean something other than would ordinarily be meant. (Op. cit., p. 212.)

To judge by her more recent writings, there is reason to think that Cora Diamond would not disagree with the view that has been put forward here. In her introduction to *The Realistic Spirit*, she speaks about 'a dramatic shift' that is central to Wittgenstein's later work, one that

went with a profound criticism of the *Tractatus*, ... a rejection ... of a Kantian spirit which lays down ... internal conditions of language's being language, of thought's being thought. The notion in the later philosophy of philosophy as liberating is thus tied to an ability to look at the use without imposing on it what one thinks must already be there in it. The notion of use itself and what is meant by giving and presenting it thus also changes: an expression is not presented timelessly - its use is not given - by the general form of the propositions it characterizes; use can be seen only as belonging to the spatial, temporal phenomenon of language. (Pp. 32 f.)

And, in a discussion elsewhere about the private language argument, she writes: 'Wittgenstein's argument is designed to let us see that there is not anything we want. ... [This] does

¹² We may note, in this connection, that many of the invocations of nonsense in *Philosophical Investigations* are tentative or conditional.

not show that *something* is "logically impossible" or "conceptually impossible" ... ; it shows us that there was not anything at all that we were imagining.¹³

Now if I understand these passages correctly, they involve a rejection of the idea that, from the point of view of Wittgenstein's later work, it could be a task of philosophy to decide under what conditions a sentence makes sense. This would be misguided, as I have tried to argue, for two reasons: first, because it is a mistake to suppose that we can discuss the meaning of a sentence apart from its use, and second, because it is a mistake to believe that philosophy can place limits on the possible uses of language. If that is how these passages by Cora Diamond are to be read, they constitute an implicit rejection of part of her own position in 'What Nonsense Might Be'. But even if I concur in her rejection of it, I still think a great deal is to be learnt from that essay.

¹³ 'Rules: Looking in the Right Place', in *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars*, edited by D. Z. Phillips and Peter Winch (Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 21.