

DAVID R. CERBONE*

PRACTICALLY NONSENSE. AN ANIMATED EXAMINATION OF THE SENSE–NONSENSE DIVIDE(S)¹

SUMMARY: This paper explores the distinction between sense and nonsense starting from a notion of *practical sense*. Using the austere conception of nonsense associated with certain readings of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* as a foil, I argue that beginning with practically articulated senses brings into view a kind of nonsense – practical nonsense – which does not adhere to the austerity of the austere conception. Practical nonsense is not sheer nonsense, but instead can be understood as involving *cartoon senses*. Rather than a wholesale repudiation of the austere conception, the category of practical nonsense offers a further way of enlisting the category of nonsense as a form of philosophical criticism. Work by Cora Diamond and Stanley Cavell, both of whom appeal to animated cartoons at crucial junctures, is illustrative of this form of criticism.

* West Virginia University, Department of Philosophy. E-mail: cerbone@wvu.edu. ORCID: 0000-0001-8047-4043.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the International Society for Phenomenological Studies. I am grateful to the audience for an especially animated discussion. Maria Balaska read an early draft of this paper and discussed it with me at some length. I am grateful for both her insights and support. I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for both their encouraging and challenging comments. Finally, I would like to thank Krystian Bogucki for his comments and suggestions, but also for inviting me to contribute to this journal issue, as it prompted me to start assembling the many scattered thoughts I’ve had about these matters.

There is a lack of clarity about the role of
imaginability in our investigation. Namely, about
the extent to which it ensures that a sentence
makes sense.

(Wittgenstein 2009: § 395)

1. Introduction: Enriching the Austerity Plan

The basic question I want to consider in this paper is how starting out from a Heideggerian notion of practical-material sense affects our understanding of the varieties of nonsense and, more specifically, of the kinds of nonsense to which philosophy might especially be prone. Most discussions of nonsense – and of the distinction between sense and nonsense – focus (understandably) on these ideas in the context of thinking about *language* and so primarily understand these ideas and distinctions as *semantic* in nature. The kind of Heideggerian position I want to start from points to a layer of sense claimed to be more basic than the semantic layer typically considered.² My own sense is that starting from here reconfigures considerably how we understand the sense-nonsense distinction; indeed, my sense is that we get more than one such distinction, as well as what I'll offer as in-between notions. The appearance of these latter kinds of – let's call them for now – not-quite-senses allows us to recognize and so diagnose kinds of philosophical confusion that elude the more standard ways of dividing the semantic territory between what makes sense full-stop and what is nonsense full-stop.

The so-called austere conception of nonsense emerging out of what have been dubbed *resolute* readings of the *Tractatus* is illustrative of this sort of either-or divide.³ On the austerity model, the diagnosis of a sentence's nonsensicality is always traceable to the *absence* of meaning for one or more of the sentence's constituents. To use Wittgenstein's example in the *Tractatus*,⁴ "Socrates is identical" is nonsense because no meaning has been established for "is identical" as a one-place predicate (in contrast to the two-place, "Socrates is identical with the teacher of Plato"). What the austere conception assiduously avoids is any understanding of nonsense – what it deems substantive nonsense – that is to be understood as an attempt to combine meaningful constituents that have the

² I will not in this paper be defending this claim so much as spelling out what I take to be some of its consequences for thinking about nonsense.

³ To the best of my knowledge, the principal origin for this approach to the *Tractatus* (and to Wittgenstein more generally) is Diamond (1991a). The term "resolute reading" – in contrast to the kind of "chickening out" of which Diamond writes – first appears in Goldfarb (1997).

⁴ See Wittgenstein (1961): 5.4733.

wrong *kind* of meaning to be so combined. That is, on the substantive conception, a sentence's nonsensicality is to be understood as a function of what the constituent elements *do* mean, only those meanings do not, we might say, play nicely together. "Caesar is a prime number"⁵ is nonsense because Roman emperors are the wrong kind of thing to which numerical properties such as *being prime* might be meaningfully predicated. As the austere conception sees it, the principal mistake of the substantive conception is its understanding of the meanings of words as something the words have *independently* of the meaningful sentences in which they figure. A word that figures in a string of words deemed to be nonsense means *just what it means* when it appears in meaningful sentences. It's just that this meaning doesn't mesh with the meanings of the other words figuring in this string. By contrast, the austere conception, following Frege's famous context principle,⁶ insists on the primacy of the whole sentence, wherein individual words and phrases can be discerned and understood as contributing to the meaningful whole. Absent that meaningful whole, words have only a kind of *psychological* resonance. Hence Frege's Context Principle appearing in tandem with his instruction "always to separate the logical from the psychological" (Frege 1980: x).⁷

I have argued elsewhere⁸ that starting from the kind of practical perspective Heidegger advocates allows for a bit in the way of irresoluteness without necessarily courting all the difficulties the austere conception of nonsense seeks to avoid; moreover, allowing for some irresoluteness thereby puts nonsense to work in the phenomenological articulation of Heidegger's ontology by, roughly, helping to illuminate ontological-categorical distinctions. I wish to continue that argument here in order to further complicate the kind of either-or, all-or-nothing approach the austere conception recommends. Although the ideas I'll be developing here have their origins in Heidegger – and especially in his 1926 *Logic* lectures – I take many of these ideas to be fruitful in terms of understanding Wittgenstein as well. Despite the tendency of the austere conception to reach beyond its anchoring in the *Tractatus* to encompass the later Wittgenstein as well,⁹ I would contend that a conception of nonsense – and of the distinction

⁵ This example figures prominently in Diamond (1991a)

⁶ See Frege (1980), where he cautions in the Introduction "never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition" (x).

⁷ As I hope becomes clear in the ensuing discussion, challenging the austere conception of nonsense requires flouting Frege's dictum concerning the logical and the psychological while also challenging the conception of the psychological at work in Frege's appeal. Psychology here is often depicted as kind of private play of images, something purely subjective in contrast to the objectivity of logic. My sense is that this under-describes the psychological. For related worries about the deployment of the logical-psychological distinction in the austere conception of nonsense, see McManus (2014).

⁸ See Cerbone (2022) for a fuller explication of the argument and for extended discussion of the Heideggerian ideas that here figure primarily to frame the issues I wish to explore.

⁹ Diamond (1991a) already suggests this extension: see 202-203.

between sense and nonsense – that allows more in the way of variety and indeterminacy (by the latter, I mean a tolerance of sort-of, in-between cases) is more in keeping with both the spirit and letter of the later Wittgenstein. That there are, as Wittgenstein insists at the outset of the *Investigations*, “countless kinds of sentences”¹⁰ suggests that we should expect anything but a one-size-fits-all understanding both of meaning and its various possible deficiencies.¹¹

I will proceed in the following manner: first, I’ll sketch out in a little more detail the Heideggerian conception of sense that serves as my starting point. I will then use this sketch to develop a notion of *practical nonsense*, which allows for both linguistic and other forms of representation despite being nonsensical from a practical point of view. For reasons that will become clear, I’ll refer to these primarily as *cartoon senses*. The possibility of these forms of representation helps to distinguish something that might be legitimately called nonsensical from a more thoroughgoing kind that hews to the terms of the austere conception. These further forms of representation are in a sense nonsensical, but without being mere gibberish; at the same time, they are not entirely innocent when it comes to the possibility of philosophical confusion. Two examples – from Cora Diamond’s essay, “Rules: Looking in the Right Place” and Stanley Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason* – are illustrative of how treating representations of practical nonsense as straight-up sense is symptomatic of a deeper problem. Although I will only work my way slowly toward a discussion of these examples, my puzzlement about the import of these passages in Diamond and Cavell, both of which appeal to animated cartoons at crucial junctures, has in large part inspired this essay.

2. Of Hammers and Soup: Heidegger and Practical (Non)Sense

The basic Heideggerian idea is this: sense or significance is first grasped through a kind of practical engagement with the world that Heidegger refers to in *Being and Time* as *circumspection* (or *circumspective concern*).¹² In his nearby (1925-26) *Logic* lectures, he develops in detail an account of how predicative, propositional sense is *founded* on a kind of pre-predicative understanding that is practically oriented:

¹⁰ See Wittgenstein (2009): § 23. On my understanding of the later Wittgenstein, the importance of this remark cannot be overstated.

¹¹ See Glock (2004) as illustrative of resistance of the austere reading in favor of – as the title suggests – a robust pluralism when it comes to kinds of nonsense.

¹² See Chapter 3 of Division 1 of Heidegger (1961) for the canonical discussion of his idea of *circumspection*.

Speaking indicatively about something – “this table here,” “that window over there,” “the chalk,” “the door” – already entails [their prior] disclosure. What does this disclosure consist in? Answer: the thing we encounter is uncovered in terms of the end-for-which of its serviceability. It is already posited in meaning – it already makes sense. Do not understand this to mean that we were first given a something that is free of meaning, and then a meaning gets attached to it. Rather, what is first of all “given” – and we still have to determine what that word means – is the “for-writing,” the “for-entering-and-exiting,” the “for-illuminating,” the “for-sitting.” That is, writing, entering-exiting, sitting, and the like are what we are *a priori* involved with. What we know and learn when we “know our way around” are these uses-for-which we understand it. (Heidegger 2016:121)

As practically oriented, this form of understanding is at the same time *worldly*: “Every form of speaking about things is, as an ontological comportment of existence, already grounded in existence as world-open. That is, all speech speaks about something that is somehow already disclosed” (Heidegger 2016: 121). Consider the standard Heideggerian example of a hammer. A hammer is grasped – literally and figuratively – as something *with-which* to hammer, for example. To say that senses are *practically* articulated means that they refer to projects, tasks, and modes of self-understanding, and they are, by and large, *materially* expressed. Importantly, these senses have a *public, normative* dimension: that the hammer is *for* hammering means that the hammer is grasped in terms of how it is primarily used (and *ought* to be used).

To work our way toward a kind of sense-nonsense distinction in the practical domain, notice first that these normatively charged significations allow for – and tolerate – what we can think of as non-standard or deviant uses that might be taken up for a wide range of motivations from the ingeniously innovative to the willfully perverse. While a hammer is for hammering in nails, it can be used to prop up a window or crack open a coconut. When we use the hammer in these norm-violating but nonetheless useful ways, we still see and understand the implement *as* a hammer, but now put to use in a manner outside of its focal usage. That a hammer *can* be used for cracking open a coconut is obvious. Other uses to which a hammer may be put are less obvious and, in some cases, less tractable. I can use my hammer to stir a can of paint in a pinch, although that is likely to make the hammer unusable, or at least only usable after considerable cleaning. In both the obvious and less obvious cases, the task to which the hammer is put enlists the material features of the hammer (the driving force in the case of the coconut, the length of the handle in the case of the can of paint). That there are these material features helps to account for these various practical possibilities that lie outside the hammer’s “official” use for hammering in nails. In coming to understand what hammers are and how they are to be used, we also thereby come to understand these material features in ways that allow us to enlist them for other purposes. Even the relative neophyte when it comes to hammering can figure out that a hammer can be put to other uses: just watch an angry toddler chase another toddler with a toy hammer.

At the same time, these material features also make for *constraints* on the range of uses to which a hammer can be non-standardly put. Standing before my steaming pot of soup and unable to locate my ladle, a hammer is unlikely to be something I reach for as a substitute. Not only would I do better to reach for a measuring cup or coffee mug – or just dip the bowls in one by one – getting the soup from the pot into a bowl using a hammer is something I recognize that I *cannot* do. It does not *make sense* to use a hammer to serve soup, not because that deviates from the socially instituted propriety of hammering in nails (effectively propping open the window deviates too), but because the material features that make a hammer good for hammering in nails make it ill-suited for serving soup. Notice that the sense at issue is not a matter of linguistic sense. The sentence, “Henry served the soup with a hammer,” is not gibberish, nor is it nonsense in the manner of the austere conception. No failure to assign a sense to one or more constituents of the sentence has occurred. But the sense it makes is a kind of silly sense, since anyone who hears the sentence will recognize it as saying something absurd in the sense that while it makes a kind of sense to *say* it, it doesn’t make sense to *do* it. We can, if we like, make up rhymes and songs employing such sentences:

The diners started to clamor
 When the soup was hot.
 I’ll use my trusty hammer
 To empty out the pot.

Hardly the makings of a Lewis Carroll rhyme, but you get the idea.¹³ That such a rhyme could be accompanied by *illustrations* – and that only some illustrations would be appropriate (e.g. ones featuring hammers, soup pots, etc.) while others would not (a family enjoying a day of downhill skiing, a pair of koalas munching on eucalyptus leaves, etc.) – will be considered shortly.

The above example indicates a way in which linguistic or semantic sense outstrips practical sense. It is very easy to put into words things that cannot be done: what makes for material constraints in the case of practical senses impose no such constraints on the linguistic domain. This is something Heidegger calls attention to in his *Logic* lectures: in “the statement’s modification of the as-

¹³ See Lewis Carroll’s “The Mad Gardener’s Song” for a far better example of nonsense of this variety, although some stanzas venture closer to a variety of nonsense that I want to distinguish from practical nonsense. This distinction is also applicable to the discussion later in Heidegger (2016), at the point where he contrasts being perceptually ready to encounter a deer, the Shah of Iran, and the cube root of 69. While the first is perfectly ordinary and the second is exceedingly unlikely (in 1926), both are to be distinguished from the third. I discuss this example at length in Cerbone (2022). See also McManus (2014) for a nuanced discussion of some of the difficulties facing an austere understanding of nonsense. McManus there makes considerable use of Lewis Carroll.

structure ... the underlying understanding of the thing that gets flattened out in and through the statement” (Heidegger 2016: 129). Propositional sense is a kind of leveling down of practical-material sense, precisely because language is, we might say, materially indifferent: the actual hammer’s material features impose constraints on what one can do with the hammer and what can be done to it. The word “hammer” has no favored material realization – pixels, pen marks, pencil scratchings, and fingerpaint will all do the trick – and what can be done with “hammer” is constrained by grammatical rules that impose (only) *linguistic* constraints on what can be meaningfully said. These rules – such as they are – run independently of the material constraints operative in the domain of practical significance. I can say all manner of things that make linguistic sense, such as all my talk about serving soup with hammers, that are, from a practical point of view, nonsensical. Some things that it makes sense to *say* are not things that it makes sense to *do* (or even *try* doing).

3. Representing vs. Realizing: Cartoon Sense

I want at this juncture to consider another kind of possibility of representation apart from linguistic expression that also flouts the constraints of practical-material senses. As I have already indicated, I will refer to this kind of sense as *cartoon-sense*. This kind of sense is not limited to animated cartoons, but cartoons provide a ready and familiar example of what interests me. They are also the example other philosophers have reached for in exploring certain forms of philosophical confusion (more on that shortly). A character in an animated cartoon could, for example, serve soup with a hammer. More than one way comes to mind: the cartoon chef could extract globs of soup by quickly moving the hammer from the bottom of the pot to above the surface, thereby ejecting a quantity of soup that just happens to land perfectly in the waiting bowl; alternatively, the chef could use the hammer to pound the area around the pot of soup, thereby ejecting the soup, which then divides as it emerges from the pot before falling neatly into an array of bowls on the stovetop (I’m pretty confident I’ve seen something like this in one or more cartoons at some point in my life). Not only do such techniques fall into the category, “Don’t try this at home!” but the preposterous character of what we are shown makes trying this at all – anywhere – more than a bad idea.

Cartoons allow for the depiction of all manner of things that we can, in one sense, readily understand. We can, for example, *describe* what we are seeing when we watch such things: a coyote who doesn’t fall until he realizes he’s run off the edge of a cliff; a painted wall’s becoming an opening for one character to use, while still thwarting another; toasters that exhibit virtues such as bravery and loyalty; singing clocks and candlesticks; and so on. Nearly every cartoon – apart from those that strive for certain forms of realism (think of some of the sequences in *Fantasia*) – avail themselves of cartoon senses. Beyond saying that cartoon senses are the kinds of senses typically expressed in cartoons, we might

hazard the following as a kind of general characterization: cartoon senses are senses that are (visually) *representable-but-not-realizable*. As such, they fall into the general category of practical nonsense. That what happens in cartoons can also be described indicates that cartoon senses have counterparts in the linguistic domain: what can be represented-but-not-realized in the visual domain can also be put into words. What we see when we watch cartoons admits of more and less apt, more and less accurate descriptions. These descriptions make sense in terms of their describing what happens in the cartoon, but they too traffic in the unrealizable.

If we are to refer to cartoon senses – whether visual or linguistic – as a kind of nonsense, they do not fit comfortably with the kind(s) of nonsense typically discussed in philosophy. Such latter cases include haphazard combinations of words, but also, more interestingly, sentences with words that at least appear to be combined in a grammatically respectable way. Consider again the frequently cited example, “Caesar is a prime number.” If that is nonsense, that is not (only) because what it appears to say is not realizable (don’t go looking for any Roman generals among the set of prime numbers) but it is not clearly representable either. What would a picture of a Roman general who *is* a prime number even look like? The closest I can come to imagining *anything* is perhaps a *numeral* adorned with the regalia befitting a Roman general.

4. Of (Singing) Mice and Men: Philosophy And/With Cartoons

Another kind of nonsense or confusion in language that seems markedly different from cartoon senses comes from Wittgenstein, as well as John Cook’s classic discussion of him.¹⁴ Consider: “John felt Mary’s pain.” Understood one way, that is not at all nonsensical. It’s just another way of saying that John noticed that Mary was in pain, felt badly for her, offered sympathy, and so on. (Notice that there are no obstacles either to representation or realization as yet.) Confusion begins to set in when, as Cook notes, a philosopher tries to distinguish *that* sense of “John felt Mary’s pain” from what the philosopher purports is the *literal* sense of that expression, usually in the course of trying to articulate a special sense of *privacy* that pertains to “sensations” but not beachfront property or secret gardens. The philosopher might say, “Of course, John does not literally feel Mary’s pain. That would be (metaphysically) impossible.” The difficulty here is that it is not at all clear just what sense this supposedly literal sense is supposed to make. The problem is not a practical problem, as though it just doesn’t happen (or happen to happen), that people do not literally feel one another’s pains in the sense of *literal* the philosopher is emphasizing; rather, the problem is that it is not clear at all just *what* is being emphasized *or* excluded, in the

¹⁴ See Cook (1968), especially Sections II – IV. As I note in the body of the paper below, I was led to Cook’s discussion of privacy by Diamond (1989).

sense that there is nothing that has yet been represented that, for whatever reason, metaphysical or otherwise, cannot be realized.

Consider another example taken from Cook: “Peter has his father’s build.” Cook uses this example to expose – and satirize – the peculiarity in the philosopher’s insistence on there being a literal sense that turns out to name something impossible. Here too the counterpart to the philosopher in the case of pain might be understood as saying, “Of course, Peter doesn’t *literally* have his father’s build. That would be impossible.” What exactly is being excluded here? What would it *be* for one person to have another person’s build in *that way*? What way? Is there a *way* at all? Could there even be a cartoon-sense that represents this, albeit with the caveat that what it represents is unrealizable? Imagine we have a scene with a young Peter standing next to his father. As the scene unfolds, a dotted line begins to form around the father, which then separates from him (so that, for extra drama, Peter’s father collapses in a heap, like a heap of clothes on the floor) and then surrounds Peter so that he now has grown in stature to resemble his father. Would that be a depiction of Peter having his father’s build in the kind of literal sense Cook is trying to deconstruct? We could also make a cartoon purporting to depict the philosopher’s allegedly literal sense of pain: imagine a close-up of Peter’s father’s shoulder, which is depicted as red and throbbing. We can then show that red-and-throbbing patch as being “extracted” from the father’s shoulder and then “placed” on Peter’s shoulder. Is this Peter (literally) having his father’s injury? Or his father’s pain? Is it a more literal sense than the sense when I compare notes with a friend who has had the same troubles with his knee as I?

I was led to Cook’s examples by Cora Diamond’s remarks on the distinction between what is imaginable and what is possible in her essay, “Rules: Looking in the Right Place.” The reference to Cook appears in a discussion of the first paragraph of Wittgenstein 2009: § 243:

A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. So one could imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves. – An explorer who watched them and listened to their talk might succeed in translating their language into ours. (This would enable him to predict these people’s actions correctly, for he also hears them making resolutions and decisions.)

This remark appears in the lead-up to what is commonly referred to as the *private language argument*. The scenario Wittgenstein invites us to imagine here is no doubt peculiar, but it does not yet engage the notion of privacy he wants to interrogate and – at least on one reading – dissolve.¹⁵ The imagined monologists

¹⁵ I have no intention in this paper of wading into the intricacies of the private language argument, including the issue of whether that label is apt for this stretch of passages in the *Investigations*.

use language in a way that is *solitary* – we are to imagine them as only talking to themselves but never to one another – but not *private*, both in the sense that we can easily eavesdrop on what they are saying (since they talk to themselves out loud) and in the sense that we can thereby figure out what they mean. What they say to themselves is sufficiently correlated with what they do – their resolutions and decisions are sufficiently coordinate with their actions – so as to allow for translation into our language. Although an odd language-game, it nonetheless includes aspects of what Wittgenstein emphasizes about his use of the term *language-game* all the way back at the beginning of the *Investigations*: “I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the activities in which it is woven, a ‘language-game’” (Wittgenstein 2009: § 7). That the interweaving is present in the case of the monologists is what gives the imagined explorer a sufficient grip on what they are saying (and why) so as to be able to translate the language. Armed with these translations, the explorer can, as Wittgenstein says, predict what these people will do, even though he will not then be able to talk *to* them (because *talking-to-someone-else* has no place in the language-game of these people).

About Wittgenstein’s example, Diamond writes the following: “What exactly is Wittgenstein saying is possible? Nothing at all. It is important that he does not use the word ‘possible’ there, but only ‘sich denken’” (Diamond 1989: 20). Diamond elaborates upon this by noting that elsewhere Wittgenstein “says that to say that something is imaginable is to say, roughly, that we can make an image of it, and he adds that we can always substitute for an image a painted picture or some such thing” (Diamond 1989: 20). Diamond here fills out Wittgenstein’s “some such thing” by appealing precisely to *cartoons*:

In the kind of case we are considering, it is helpful to think of substituting a movie. We can imagine, we can have a movie of, mice singing to *Cinderella*. There *is* such a movie. Is it *logically possible* or *conceptually possible* for mice to sing ‘Cinderella, Cinderella’ and so on?... Terms like ‘logically possible’, ‘conceptually possible’, when they occur in philosophy, often indicate some kind of confusion. (Diamond 1989: 20)

Diamond’s point here, I take it, is that fixating on the question of whether the peculiar scenario of the monological tribe is possible leads us away from the work Wittgenstein wants it to do, just as thinking about whether singing mice are logically or conceptually possible only detracts from our enjoyment of *Cinderella*. He is not here positing something as possible but instead encouraging us to imagine something as one way of filling out the idea of a “solitary language.” The language here is solitary in the way that the card game is: one plays it by oneself, although an onlooker can decipher and track what the game is all about. *Could* there be such a language or such a tribe? One way to think about Dia-

mond's "nothing at all" is to see such a question as beside the point. Getting caught up in the issue of possibility is a distraction. But another way to think about it is to appreciate the lack of clarity in terms of what kind of "possibility" is being asked after. While we can mouth the words – and imaginatively represent – "A tribe of people who talk out loud only to themselves and never to one another," thinking about it as a (real) possibility raises myriad questions: How do the people of this tribe get along with one another? Don't they notice that others are talking and do they take advantage of this? If the explorer can predict the actions of these monologists, can't the members of this tribe do this too? Wouldn't that lead them to maybe *not* speak out loud so often? And how do any of them learn to talk in the first place? Do the children, like Augustine's child, decipher the connection between words and actions by watching the elders, while the elders never encourage or correct – let alone address – any of the children? What would that look like? To just consider the example only as something to imaginatively represent leaves any such questions hanging. Indeed, it renders such questions irrelevant to the work Wittgenstein wants the example to do, which is to begin to whittle away at the philosopher's quest for a special kind of privacy.

Singing mice are an example of what I'm calling practical nonsense. Given the way practical senses engage and enlist the materially real features of our environment, the idea of talking mice is like that of the soup-serving hammer. Both ideas are just silly, but that makes them especially good fodder for cartoon senses. Part of the delight of cartoons is their being especially well-suited to represent what cannot be realized. Actions and events that make no sense from a practical point of view can nonetheless be represented in the medium of cartoons in order to entertain us, whether by being amusing or frightening. It would only detract from their entertainment value to then entertain seriously the question of whether what is depicted is – for all its practical impossibility – conceptually or logically possible. It is, of course, both logically and conceptually possible for *cartoon mice* to talk: Disney's *Cinderella* provides ample demonstration of this. However, cartoon mice are no more mice than cartoon hammers – hammers that are, among other things, good for serving soup – are hammers; neither of them is encumbered by the materiality – the blood and guts of real mice in one case; the wood and metal of real hammers in the other – that would have to – but cannot – be enlisted for there to be actual talking mice and the like. Cartoon mice are thus not a species of *possible mouse* any more than cartoon hammers are a variety of real hammers (but ones that just don't happen to be on the rack next to the others at the hardware store).¹⁶

¹⁶ Notice that here we encounter a difficult question: in the sentence, "The mice sang to Cinderella," what does "mice" mean? Does it mean what "mice" means in, "The mice scurried across the floor when the kitchen light came on"? In one sense, the answer is surely "Yes," since we readily identify the cartoon creatures in *Cinderella* as *mice* rather than, say, rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks, and so on. At the same time, I've insisted that cartoon mice are not another species of mouse because it makes no sense to think of real

When Diamond says that terms “like ‘logically possible’, ‘conceptually possible’, when they occur in philosophy, often indicate some kind of confusion,” she does not offer examples, nor does she say just what kind of confusion is in play. I’ve tried to give some indication of how that confusion arises in the case of singing mice and the like: in such cases, cartoon senses are treated as instances of – or continuing the enumeration of – non-cartoon senses and so as thereby encouraging questions of possibility. Cartoon mice are treated as a kind of mouse, just as dormice and field mice are kinds of mouse. But a cartoon mouse only borrows the outward appearance of a mouse, really only just enough for the average viewer to recognize the images as images of mice (even though real mice do not wear clothes, have a nuanced range of human-like facial expressions, or, of course, talk and sing). To treat such images as depicting kinds of mice is to project the inner workings of real mice into the picture, even though nothing of the kind is actually represented. The confused thought is that there must be inner workings that allow the mice to sing and talk, thereby inviting the thought of whether a mouse with such inner workings is in some way possible. The confusion here is akin to the one that Wittgenstein considers in the case of the picture of the steaming pot:

Of course, if water boils in a pot, steam comes out of the pot, and also a picture of steam comes out of a picture of a pot. But what if one insisted on saying that there must also be something boiling in the picture of the pot? (Wittgenstein 2009: § 297)

This is not the only place that Wittgenstein puts the example of a pot to use. Fifteen remarks prior to this one, he considers a close relative of cartoon senses, namely, *fairy tale senses*. Notice in particular his handling of the issue of whether what’s depicted should be understood as simply *false* or instead *nonsensical*.

“But in a fairy tale a pot too can see and hear!” (Certainly; but it *can* also talk.)

“But a fairy tale only invents what is not the case; it does not talk *nonsense*, does it?” – It’s not as simple as that. Is it untrue or nonsensical to say that a pot talks? Does one have a clear idea of the circumstances in which we’d say of a pot that it talked? (Even a nonsense poem is not nonsense in the same way as the babble of a baby.) (Wittgenstein 2009: § 282)

I’ll note two things about this passage: first, to think of fairy tales as simply depicting things that are untrue would align with the idea that what is depicted is, while untrue, nonetheless conceptually or logically possible. Wittgenstein sug-

mice as (really) singing. While this oscillation puts considerable pressure on my appeal to cartoon senses, I want to suggest that just such oscillation – or indeterminacy – is the hallmark of a cartoon sense as making a kind of sense without (really or fully) making sense. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for challenging me on this point, although I worry if I’ve said enough to meet the challenge.

gests here that we do not have “a clear idea of the circumstances” in which we could understand a pot – and I take it he means here an actual pot – as talking (except in the metaphorical sense of bubbling, hissing, and the like). Notice what he says later in the *Investigations* about the idea of a thinking chair:

The chair is thinking to itself ...

WHERE? In one of its parts? Or outside its body; in the air around it? Or not *anywhere* at all? But then what is the difference between the chair’s talking silently to itself and another one’s doing so, next to it? – But then how is it with man: where does *he* talk to himself? How come that this question seems senseless; and that no specification of a place is necessary, except just that this man is talking silently to himself? Whereas the answer of *where* the chair talks silently to itself seems to demand an answer. – The reason is: we want to know *how* the chair is supposed to be like a human being; whether, for instance, its head is at the top of the back, and so on. (Wittgenstein 2009: § 361 – third paragraph omitted)

At the same time, we have no difficulty whatsoever following stories with enchanted pots that talk, differentiate them from enchanted tea kettles, cutlery, and so on. Hence the second thing to note: although there is an attenuation of sense in the case of talking pots and kettles, fairy tales are not nonsense in the way that babbling is nonsense or mere jumbles of words and the like are, nor are the sentences that make up fairy tales like the “Socrates is identical” example from the *Tractatus*. We can make sense of this difference if we treat cartoons and fairy tales as trafficking in practical nonsense, while still making sense from an imagistic, linguistic, or literary perspective. Such images and stories enlist our understanding on more than one level and the clash between them is part of what makes them delightful. It is worth noting here the challenges passages like the one about the talking pot pose for the “resolute” reading of Wittgenstein’s austere conception of nonsense. As linguistically expressible, practical nonsense does not fit comfortably into its all-or-nothing scheme. Even leaving aside my introduction of the idea of practical nonsense, *Investigations* § 282 pretty clearly cuts against the spirit – and perhaps even the letter – of the austere conception of nonsense, which refuses to countenance different kinds of nonsense.¹⁷

¹⁷ Insofar as the austere conception *does* countenance different kinds of nonsense, those differences are purely *psychological* rather than *logical* (in keeping with Frege’s principles noted at the outset of the paper). As I suggested above, what is needed here is an account of what kind of differences psychological differences are. That is, it does not seem to be enough to say that the difference between stories involving talking pots and mere strings of words is that we *experience* the stories differently than we experience the mere strings where that difference in experience is cashed out in terms of associative connections and plays of images. Such a gloss seems to me to under-describe the experience of hearing and enjoying such stories insofar as experiencing them involves the grasp of some form of (admittedly indeterminate) representational content. There are, in cartoon and fairy tale cases, constraints on what “connections” or “plays of images” are in order, unlike in the case of strings of words, where, associatively speaking, pretty much

5. Flower Power: Cavell, Cartoons, and Worldly Understanding

Confusions about cartoon mice are hardly common in philosophy, so when Diamond says that terms “like ‘logically possible’, ‘conceptually possible’, when they occur in philosophy, often indicate some kind of confusion,” we are still in need of a more substantive example. Fortunately, such an example is near to hand: in *The Claim of Reason*, in the chapter that closes what he calls “the quest of traditional epistemology,” Cavell considers a case of just the kind of confusion that Diamond warns of. Cavell adduces the example as illustrative of the hollowness of some protests against the kinds of denials of knowledge and certainty that are the stock and trade of traditional epistemology, all of the, “For all I know, I could be....” and “It is always possible that my judgment will later be disconfirmed.” Frustrated by how ridiculous such claims are apt to sound – especially when we imagine them uttered in the course of “everyday life” – the self-styled commonsense response is nonetheless apt to invite the same form of ridicule. As Cavell notes, this kind of “attempt to outface the traditional philosopher’s denial of knowledge must lead to a siege of kicking stones or checking cats or some other incoherence” (Cavell 1979: 233). At this point, he adds that it “is worth seeing this in a particular case.” The case in point is a passage from Norman Malcolm’s “The Verification Argument.” The paper is a long and meticulous examination of what Malcolm takes to be the underlying argument for the traditional epistemologist’s claim that no empirical judgment can ever be conclusively verified, and so that one can never be said to know (with certainty) any such judgment. Malcolm’s analysis at many points turns on pointing out the ways in which he sees the traditional epistemologist as – perhaps unwittingly – mixing and matching different senses of key words and phrases, among them different senses of possibility. The details of his analysis need not concern us (nor do they concern Cavell), as his appeal to Malcolm really concerns one passage where the voice of sober commonsense begins to waver. I quote in full the passage from Malcolm just as Cavell does (the passage begins with a rehearsal of Malcolm’s running example of his knowing that a certain phrase appears on a certain page of Willam James’ *The Principles of Psychology*):

anything goes. With cartoons and fairy tales, there is, in other words, still room for distinctions between *understanding* and *misunderstanding*, *describing* and *misdescribing*, and so on.

The reason is obvious for saying that my copy of James does not have the characteristic that is print undergoes spontaneous changes. I have read millions of printed words on many thousands of printed pages. I have not encountered a single instance of a printed word vanishing from a page or being replaced by another printed word, suddenly and without external cause. Nor have I heard of any other person who had such an encounter. There is overwhelming evidence that printed words do not behave in that way. *It is just as conclusive as the evidence that houses do not turn in to flowers – that is, absolutely conclusive evidence.* (Malcolm 1963: 38 – my emphasis)

About this passage – in particular, the italicized portion – Cavell immediately notes that “to say that we have ‘absolutely conclusive evidence’ that houses do not turn into flowers is not merely too weak; such a remark is itself produced by the same hysteria against which it is struggling” (Cavell 1979: 233). Malcolm’s overreach here lies in his treating “Houses do not turn into flowers” as a kind of *fact*, and so as treating “Houses turn into flowers” as a kind of *possibility*, one which has been ruled out by means of “absolutely conclusive evidence.” As a kind of rough and ready guideline – although he warns that what he offers is by no means an argument – Cavell suggests: “If there is absolutely conclusive evidence that S is P, then that S is P is a well-established fact; on the basis of the evidence you may exercise the right to say you know it is a fact” (Cavell 1979: 233). Can that right, such as it is, be exercised in Malcolm’s case? After all, I might say that when it comes to houses turning into flowers, I’ve never seen it happen, no one I know or have ever heard about has seen it happen, and so on. I stride confidently into homes I have never entered before, unconcerned about being swallowed up in floral abundance, no longer sitting in a living room but finding myself instead mired in pollen and petals. But is this something I *know* doesn’t happen in the sense that I have at any point – at least any point prior to reading the passage in Malcolm or Cavell – *assured myself* of? What in particular did I *do* in order to be so assured? Was there ever a time that I entered an unfamiliar home while actually concerned that it might turn into a flower while I was inside? Cavell’s questions follow a similar pattern:

But is it merely *in fact* the case that houses do not turn into flowers? What do we learn – what fact is conveyed – when we are told that they do not? What would it be like if the flowers and houses *did* turn into one another? What would “houses” and “flowers” mean in the language of such a world? What would be the difference between (what we call) stones and seeds? Where would we live in this world, and what would we grow in our gardens? And what would “grow” mean? (Cavell 1979: 233-234)

Suggesting that “Houses turn into flowers” names a possibility invites this open-ended list of questions that concern not just the “mechanics” of such a thing’s happening, but the myriad ramifications for the *senses* of an indefinitely wide array of concepts such as *house*, *flower*, *grow*, *reside*, *build*, and so on. Notice further that in challenging Malcolm’s declaration about houses and flow-

ers, Cavell is not siding with those whose obsessions with conclusive evidence have rubbed off on Malcolm; rather, in “denying that we *have* conclusive verification for this last statement, I am not to be understood as asserting that we *not* have (conclusive) verification for it. I am asserting, rather, that we do not yet know what verification for or against it would be” (Cavell 1979: 234). We do not have something whose *sense* is clear enough so that we can entertain questions concerning sufficient or insufficient verification.

Does that mean that “Houses turn into flowers” is nonsense? Its sense is clearly attenuated insofar as we cannot treat it as straightforwardly admitting of evidence for or against. But it is not nonsense in the sense of reducing to gibberish or mere marks on paper. As Cavell notes, we can do *something* – or a variety of things – with “Houses turn into flowers,” and it is at this juncture that he invokes the idea of cartoons:

It has been suggested to me that “Houses are turning into flowers” does mean something clear, for example in an animated cartoon or a dream. This is undeniable. In such contexts we may, for example, see a cathedral with a rose window turn into a rose. But I did not wish to suggest that such a statement means nothing, only that we had to give it a clear meaning. And in having to imagine *such* a context in order to invite its projection we are imagining a world for which the statement “We have absolutely conclusive evidence that houses don’t turn into flowers” is false, or rather, means nothing, because in such a world the (our) concept of evidence has no application: anything can be followed by anything. Cartoons make us laugh because they are enough *like* our world to be terribly sad and frightening (Cavell 1979: 236).

The statement, “Houses turn into flowers” is not nonsense exactly – “I did not wish to suggest that such a statement means nothing” – and it is not – in the manner of the austere conception of nonsense – that we have (yet) to give one or more constituents of the statement a meaning full-stop. Rather, as Cavell notes, “we had to give it a clear meaning.” Offering clarification here does not mean dressing up “Houses turn into flowers” in such a way that it now names a possibility in our world, nor does it mean something trivial such as stipulating new meanings for “houses” and (or) “flowers,” e.g. by stipulating that “houses” means “rosebuds” or some such thing.¹⁸ Clarity instead means treating “Houses turn into flowers” as a representation that answers to those words as they are typically understood, but as no longer representing a genuine possibility so much as a cartoon possibility. There are myriad ways a skilled animator could render a scene that we would all agree – without special tutoring or information – depicts

¹⁸ “The house turned into a flower” is thus, I believe, different from sentences like the one found in Witherspoon (2000) concerning the *batting average* of his *telephone*. Witherspoon shows how sense can be made of such sentences, but they require something by way of explanation of how “batting average” might be usefully deployed in relation to “my telephone.” No such explanations are needed when it comes to a rendering of a house turning into a flower (or vice-versa).

houses turning into flowers, just as there are myriad cartoons and other images and stories showing little people, fairies, and so on whose houses *are* flowers. Houses turning into flowers are much like Wittgenstein's talking pot and thinking chair. They are practically nonsense in both senses: they flirt with the nonsensical, but they can be understood as long as any questions about practical realizability are emphatically bracketed.

Cartoon senses make sense in cartoon worlds, but Cavell's point is that these are worlds where things do not make the kind of sense they do in our world. These are worlds where ideas like *evidence*, *feasibility*, *proof*, *testing*, and *verification* are stretched and strained in myriad ways. What occurs in (most) cartoon worlds occurs in worlds where, as Cavell puts it, "anything can be followed by anything." It would be a mistake, therefore, to think of cartoon worlds as *possible worlds*, further away from, or closer to, the actual world by some modal metric. To entertain cartoon senses as possibilities courts the kind of conceptual confusion of which Diamond warns and Malcolm evinces. Talk of possibility invites questions of *how* something is possible, including how it hangs together with other possibilities, questions of the form that Cavell offers: how do people build and live securely in houses, what do gardens look like, what happens to all the stuff inside a house when it turns into a flower, and so on? In the context of cartoons, asking such questions just spoils the fun. In philosophy, they betray unnecessary puzzlement.

By way of conclusion, I want to return to a passage from Heidegger's *Logic* lectures that I cited early on: "Every form of speaking about things is, as an ontological comportment of existence, already grounded in existence *as world-open*. That is, all speech speaks about something that is somehow already disclosed" (Heidegger 2016: 121). Heidegger's appeal to *world* here is akin to what Cavell writes shortly after his dressing down of Malcolm, where he suggests that we can talk sensibly of the *earth* being an object that "has objects on it," whereas "the world does not have objects on it" (Cavell 1979: 237). Saying just what Heidegger (and Cavell) mean here by *world* is no simple matter,¹⁹ but in keeping with what I noted about modality above, it would be a mistake to think of it as what is often meant in philosophy by talk of the *actual world* in contrast to other only *possible worlds*. As a space of meaning or significance, the Heideggerian sense of world encompasses both actualities and possibilities, in the sense that the possibility of hammering, for example, belongs within the world of carpentry. Understanding what I've been calling *cartoon worlds* – the worlds in which cartoon senses are the order of the day – is an offshoot of the kind of openness to the world that Heidegger cites here. In being world-open – which primarily means being practically oriented toward an enviroing world – we are at the same time readily able to understand images, sequences, and descriptions that

¹⁹ I attempt some of the work that is needed to spell out what Heidegger means by *world* in Cerbone (2026).

borrow from the environing world but in ways that no longer fit or make sense in it. That we are able to do so, and so easily (small children, after all, happily enjoy cartoons despite Cavell's lament that they can be "terribly sad and frightening"), is a striking fact, well worth pondering as part of an exploration of sense and nonsense. Wittgenstein says something along the same lines late in the *Investigations*:

Don't take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, absorb us.

("Don't take it as a matter of course" – that means puzzle over this, as do over some other things which disturb you. Then what is problematic will disappear, by your accepting the one fact as you do the other.)

((The transition from obvious nonsense to something which is unobvious nonsense.)) (Wittgenstein 2009: § 524)

I do not pretend that in this paper I have made anything problematic *disappear*. If anything, my aim has been to make the distinction between sense and nonsense more complicated than it is sometimes treated. Indeed, it seems better here to talk of *distinctions* rather than just one (kind of) divide. The "pictures and fictitious narratives" that "give us pleasure" is one place to look for that complexity.

REFERENCES

- Cavell, S. (1979). *The Claim of Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cerbone, D. R. (2022). Nonsense at Work: Heidegger, the Logical, and the Ontological. In D. Dahlstrom, F. Casati (Eds.), *Heidegger on Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cerbone, D. R. (2026). *Heidegger on Being-in-the-world*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Conant, J. (2000). Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Wittgenstein. In A. Crary, R. Read (Eds.), *The New Wittgenstein*. London: Routledge.
- Cook, J. W. (1968). Wittgenstein on Privacy. In G. Pitcher (Ed.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Diamond, C. (1989). Rules: Looking in the Right Place. In D. Z. Phillips, P. Winch (Eds.), *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Diamond, C. (1991a). Throwing Away the Ladder. In C. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Diamond, C. (1991b). What Nonsense Might Be. In C. Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Frege, G. (1980). *Foundations of Arithmetic*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

- Glock, H.-J. (2004). All Kinds of Nonsense. In E. Ammereller, E. Fischer (Eds.), *Wittgenstein at Work*. New York: Routledge.
- Goldfarb, W. (1997). Between Metaphysics and Nonsense. *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 22(1), 57–73.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Heidegger, M. (2016). *Logic: The Question of Truth*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Malcolm, N. (1963). The Verification Argument. In N. Malcolm, *Knowledge and Certainty*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- McManus, D. (2014). Austerity, Psychology, and the Intelligibility of Nonsense. *Philosophical Topics*, 42(2), 161–199.
- Witherspoon, E. (2000). Conceptions of Nonsense in Carnap and Wittgenstein. In A. Crary, R. Read (Eds.), *The New Wittgenstein*. New York: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. London: Routledge
- Wittgenstein, L. (2009). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.