



Book Reviews

IAN DEARDEN, **Do Philosophers Talk Nonsense? An inquiry into the possibility of illusions of meaning**, Revised Edition, Rellet Press, 2013, 135 pp., ISBN-1-904408-10-9.

Philosophy has been practised for thousands of years as a quest for ultimate truth. Only recently has meaning come to the fore as the central philosophical issue when it was recognized as a pre-condition for truth. Truth applies to propositions, but the concepts they invoke must be meaningful even if they are devoid of a concrete reference. If concepts are understood as classificatory skills, they may be considered meaningful insofar as they serve some cognitive purpose (Kant could have said they were *zweckgemäß*) and are thus normatively acceptable. Philosophical disputes generally hinge on conceptual definitions and accusations of spouting nonsense have become too commonplace after Wittgenstein. Ian Dearden's book is a significant response to this abusive phenomenon he calls Nonsensicalism.

Let us suppose a semantic game in which a proponent (P) wants to introduce a novel concept such as global citizenship, animal rights, or gay marriage. The nonsensicalist opponent's (NO) response is to reject the proposal out of hand on grounds that the concepts in question are simply nonsensical. Dearden develops a counterargument by accusing the nonsensicalist of making an uncharitable assumption concerning the proponent's capacity to assess the meaning of his or her conceptual proposal. Upon hearing P's argument, NO may grant that the proposal is meant seriously and sincerely, but condescendingly behaves as if P lacked cognitive competence to assess the relevance, coherence or truth of his or her own utterances. Dearden calls this kind of linguistic self-deception an illusion of meaning (IOM) and his book is devoted to a thorough examination of its possibility.

Dearden's book is divided into ten chapters. The first chapter is introductory and defines 'nonsensicalism' and 'illusions of meaning'. Chapter Two examines Norman Malcolm's book *Dreaming* as an example of nonsensicalism in action. In particular, Dearden notes that Malcolm not only tends to make meaning dependent upon verification (verificationism), but also treats allegedly nonsensical statements as if they were meaningful and logically articulated. Chapter Three expands upon this and shows that when nonsensicalists are required to deal properly with nonsense it becomes much harder to demarcate between sense and nonsense and to attribute illusions of meaning to their opponents. Chapter Four seeks to show how nonsensicalists cannot avoid attributing illusions of meaning to their interlocutors. Chapter Five addresses the issue of how alleged nonsense retains an appearance of meaningfulness. This and the absence of clear cut examples of nonsense indicate further difficulties with nonsensicalism. Chapter Six discusses non-philosophical cases of illusions of meaning. Chapter Seven deepens the analysis of how illusions of meaning are possible. If the content of an utterance is really meaningless, then we could not tell what the speakers meant or whether they were deceiving themselves in believing that what they said meant anything at all. Chapter Eight discusses Wittgenstein's account of philosophical error and the absence of introspectible difference when we mean something. Since Wittgenstein denied that a speaker's meaning is related to mental events and processes, meaningful speech and illusions of meaning are harder to distinguish. Chapter Nine examines general criteria of meaningfulness as a possible ground for denying meaning to an utterance and finds them to be stipulative and arbitrary. Chapter Ten concludes with a negative assessment of nonsensicalism. Dearden advises those who would attribute illusions of meaning to their opponents to consider whether they themselves are really free of verificationist assumptions. As he sees it, even rigorous versions of nonsensicalism are liable to being arbitrarily stipulative.

Dearden's discussion compounds two highly complex issues: meaning and self-deception. A simpler approach would be to point out that there is no objective or absolute criterion of meaning upon which we could establish that something is nonsensical or not. Meaning depends always upon intersubjective criteria. A language's grammar is normative. Speakers and researchers are motivated by curiosity or non-cognitive interests.

Within the framework of Argumentation Theory, if an opponent (O) accuses a proponent (P) of spouting nonsense, P may reply by avowing his interest in contributing towards a theory of something. The burden of proof is upon O to show how P's proposal is inadequate to the purpose of the debate. P's proposal may indeed be inadequate, but that will depend upon the issue and the rules of the debate, which may be conventional. For example, in a debate among theists concerning theodicy, an atheist approach will violate a fundamental assumption of the debate and may hence be deemed not only inappropriate, but also nonsensical. By rejecting the atheist's view as nonsensical to the theistic debate, one would not impute him an illusion of meaning, but exclude him as a participant for violating the rules of the debate.

In response to this, Dearden would be right to point out that then, strictly speaking, it is a mistake to deny meaning to the atheist's proposal. The atheist's suggestion to simply drop the concept of a personal God is offensive but not meaningless or unintelligible to theists. There is no need to disabuse the atheist regarding the meaningfulness of his proposal. What the atheist needs is to be reminded of the rules constraining the debate.

One can treat nonsensicalism as a fallacy and define it as an unfair dismissal of an opponent's argument, for it violates the principle of charity. Dearden does not spell this out as he could, but it is not hard to realize its implications for philosophical debate.

Self-deception, however, may occur if a participant is not fully aware of the rules of the game. Students of musical composition often believe that the weird chord they have just discovered at the piano is new when it actually is not. Music lacks a definite meaning although it may mimic sounds of Nature and non-verbal forms of vocal expression. It is not uncommon for composers to believe that they can express something to their audience, no matter how indefinitely as it were. In this case, the attribution of an illusion of meaning to the composer does seem warranted, but no propositional knowledge is involved.

In Philosophy, however, the nonsensicalist accusation is much less convincing, for philosophers are characteristically trying to debate conceptual issues according to certain rules and within a certain tradition. They seek to be aware of the rules and to comply with them. There is, therefore, much less room for an illusion of meaning to occur. If I am aware of the rules of the debate and I believe my statement to be relevant, then it cannot be meaningless, no matter what the nonsensicalist alleges.

Dearden's book is carefully argued and it is an important contribution to Metaphilosophy and Argumentation Theory. Hopefully, from now on accusations of unintentionally saying nonsense will be wielded more cautiously in the field.

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