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Structured Propositions, Unity, and the Sense-Nonsense Distinction

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Back in the Good Old Days of Logical Positivism, theories of meaning were part of a normative project that sought not merely to describe the features of language and its use, but so to speak to separate the wheat from the chaff. In this paper, I side with Herman Cappelen (2013) in thinking that we need to rethink and reintroduce the important distinction between sense and nonsense that was ditched along with other normative aspirations during Logical Positivism's spectacular demise. Despite this, my delineation of the bounds of sense is different from Cappelen's. One of my goals in the present paper is to argue that category mistakes are paradigmatic examples of nonsensical sentences. To this end I describe one candidate for what it might be that makes category mistakes nonsensical.

Keywords: Content, category mistake, nonsense, proposition, unity, state of affairs.

0. *Structured propositions, unity, and the sense-nonsense distinction*

Language allows for the construction of meaningful units of information, but it also allows for the construction of units that according to some do not warrant the label of meaningfulness. Here might be an instance: "Streweebles floombada sharmavikssy." This sentence (if one is liberal enough to call it that) is nonsensical, since I just strung together letters into compounds without assigning them any meaning. This is not to say that the string I produced cannot be used for certain purposes. I may use it as my banking password, or use it to encode a message, etc. Despite these non-linguistic uses, it is standard practice to call such gibberish nonsense *qua* linguistic. Yet, the word 'nonsense' has been used to cover far more ground than that. Logical positivists, for instance, held that vast swathes of discourse, including almost all philosophy, contain mostly nonsense.

My concern in what follows is with how we might conceive of nonsense and its limits, and in particular with investigating what kinds of nonsense there are and what kind of failures they involve. My focus will be on grammatical nonsense, i.e. sentences that conform to the rules of grammar, to the exclusion of sentences containing mere gibberish, either in full or in part. With respect to the former, two candidates have traditionally been distinguished: sentences containing one or more terms lacking a definite semantic content and sentences containing so-called category mistakes.[1] I will follow some recent usage in calling these two candidates respectively Type I and Type II.[2] The question of whether there is Type I nonsense is, in a sense more direct: If a sentence contains one or more terms that are semantically defective, then the resulting sentence itself is rendered defective, on the popular assumption that sentential meanings are determined by the meanings of their parts and how they are combined. The question that will preoccupy us more centrally here is whether there is Type II nonsense, i.e. whether grammatical sentences ever count as nonsense. Here the way to proceed is less obvious since the sentences contain only meaningful parts arranged in ordinary ways.

To answer the question about Type II nonsense in the positive is to go against the grain.[3] I argue that category mistakes are nonsensical (section 1) and provide an account of what this means within a theory of content (section 2). In sections 3 and 4 I discuss some of the challenges this view faces, and argue that they fail to undermine it, though some serious worries loom on the horizon.

1. *Of Reactionaries and Revolutionaries*

One important nicety that needs to be settled at the outset concerns the term "meaningful", and what this term primarily applies to (in its semantic use). According to some interpreters of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* (and, in this intensional context of their theorizing, according to early Wittgenstein himself) all forms of linguistic nonsense, i.e. gibberish, category mistakes, sentences containing terms that lack meaning, all suffer from a common failing: In each instance, the speaker has failed to assign meanings to their terms. Following the nomenclature of its proponents, I'll call this position Austerity.[4] Not everyone is an Austerity theorist. To say that gibberish and sentences containing terms without content and category mistakes are all nonsensical is not (automatically) to say that there is a unique sort of failure at work in each.

[1] See, for instance Carnap (1932), although Carnap himself did not use the term 'category mistake.'

[2] Some theorists call these different types Type I and Type II nonsense respectively. See Conant (2002: 380–383); and Cappelen (2013).

[3] Theorists who deny that Type II nonsense exists include Lambert (1969); Camp (2004); Magidor (2009; 2013).

[4] See Conant (2002: 380).

Nonsensicality might after all turn out to admit of different species. Austerity requires the following further commitment which I'll abbreviate SF for Sentence First:

(SF) The parts of a sentence are meaningful only insofar as the sentence of which they are parts is meaningful.[5]

The motivation for (SF) is that, prior to grasping the meaning of the entire sentence, we cannot determine what contribution the individual sub-sentential expressions make. As a result, unless the sentence as a whole has a definite meaning, no part of it does, since the parts are meaningful only insofar as they contribute to the meaning of the whole. Most meaning theorists however do not accept the principle that the meaning of the whole determines the meaning of the parts. Rather, most theorists take sub-sentential meanings to determine the meanings of sentences, thereby accepting some principle like the Compositionality Principle:

(CP) The meaning of a sentence depends on the meanings of its parts and how they are composed.

Given the ubiquity of CP (in its various formulations), I will not attempt a defense of it, but rather take it for granted here. What follows, once we accept CP?

Take some simple sentence of the form [a is F], composed out of a proper name "a" and a predicate, "F". What divides philosophers writing on Type II nonsense is the question whether all such predications are meaningful when grammatical or whether there is some further constraint on the kinds of terms that can replace "a" and "F". One camp claims that all such sentences are meaningful. The other camp claims that replacements for "a" and "F" must respect category boundaries.[6] I'll call the former *Revolutionaries* and the latter *Reactionaries*.

Reactionaries believe that linguistic strings that cross categories are nonsensical. According to them, saying of a flesh and blood individual, like Caesar, that he is a prime number or false or bijective is nonsense, meaningless, or not significant. My aim in this paper is to advance the Reactionary thesis that cross-categorial strings are indeed nonsensical, and specifically to do so by explicating what semantic defect is exhibited by such sentences. Once I state this view in the next section, I discuss one line of opposition recently advanced by Elisabeth

[5] I formulate SF using the term 'sentence' here, even though Wittgenstein uses 'proposition'. The reader can switch them up here if they strongly object to my formulation.

[6] Precisely what categories there are is a subject of debate. Here I will operate on the minimal assumption that there is at least one division amongst categories that must be respected, the division between the concrete and the abstract. Paradigm instances of the former include individuals, like Caesar, and locations, like Cleveland. Paradigm instances of the latter include mathematical objects, like the number 3, and subjects of study, like geography. The category errors that I am concerned with match objects in one category with predicates that apply to objects from the other category.

Camp and show that it is wanting. In the penultimate section I consider a more pressing objection raised by Ofra Magidor, although it is not clear, as I hope to show, that it is effective against the view I present.

I should clarify at the outset that my proposal is pitched at the level of content, not at the level of meaning more generally.

2. *Category mistakes as nonsense*

At the level of semantic content, one popular sort of account takes sentences to express structured propositions and takes names and predicates to have as semantic contents individuals, properties and relations. The sentence

(1) Sally is taller than John,

on such a view, expresses a proposition which can be roughly represented as

(2) <<Sally, John>, being taller than>.

Some proposition theorists extend the role they play further than this. A bit more controversially, aside from being what declarative sentences express, propositions are also taken by many to play the role of contents of propositional attitudes like believing and desiring, and referents of that-clauses.[7] The proposition expressed by a sentence is the informational content of the sentence. My Reactionary thesis (like Cappelen's and Carnap's before him) is that a sentence counts as nonsense insofar as it fails to express a proposition; a thought is nonsensical insofar as it does not have a propositional content; a 'that'-clause is likewise nonsensical if it doesn't refer to a proposition.[8] Of course, the difficulty for the line I'm taking lies in specifying how these content failures occur, and explaining the roles of cross-categorial sentences in our linguistic practice.

To say that a grammatical sentence fails to express a proposition is to say that some ingredient of its propositional content is absent. As mentioned, in the case of sentences containing terms that lack semantic content, it is easy to see why no proposition is expressed, since there is a gap in the would-be structured proposition. What about cross-categorial sentences? While it is common for content theorists to represent propositions as set-theoretic objects, it is clear that an account of the nature of structured propositions is needed to account for their

[7] For grounds for hope that propositions can play such roles see chapters 1 & 2 in King, Soames, and Speaks' *New Thinking about Propositions* (2014), for an account of the value of taking propositions to play these various roles. For grounds for despair about propositions being able to play such roles see Jubien (2001) and Weber (2012).

[8] One anonymous referee asks about contextualist views which take sentences not to express propositions (but perhaps only propositional skeletons), yet for all that are not semantically defective. However, the category mistakes that are my focus fail in expressing unified propositions across the board, regardless of differences of context or point of evaluation.

unity in a way that explains how they can play the sorts of roles they are supposed to.[9] In particular, theorists have been interested in figuring out how propositional components must be unified so as to have truth-values and to be able to represent how things stand in the world. This opens up the possibility that cross-categorial sentences might fail to express propositions not because some subsentential constituent is semantically defective, but rather because their constituents lack the requisite unity. It is this latter possibility that I explore here.

There are some caveats that need to be mentioned before proceeding. First, I do not take the term 'nonsense' to apply to sentences *qua* types, but rather to sentences-in-contexts.[10] Second, I take it to be a live possibility that a sentence can appear to an agent to have propositional content even if it doesn't, in the sense that the internalized cross-categorial sentence can function in the way that contentful internalized sentences do within an agent's cognitive economy, despite being contentless.[11] Third, in some instances, what creates this illusion of content is a tendency on the part of the interpreter towards resolving discrepancies involved in the interpretation of cross-categorial strings by supplementing and (or) otherwise modifying what is being thought so as to maximize coherence.

The picture being described here has the advantage of diagnosing a common failing as the source of both Type I and II nonsense. In this sense, it is in agreement with the Austerity thesis despite the fact that it accepts compositionality. I take it to be a welcome result that we arrive at a notion of nonsense that unites the various forms the phenomenon can take.

So far, I've suggested that the semantic contents of cross-categorial strings are not propositions because they lack unity, but theorists are divided on the issue of just how propositional constituents *are* unified. There are two main ways to conceive of propositions, either as mind-independent or as mind-dependent. The choice here hinges on whether

[9] For a detailed exposition and criticism of the content theorists, see King (2009) and Soames (2010).

[10] This is done in part to avoid issues of ambiguity, but more importantly to put aside the possibility that a sentence which appears to make sense *prior* to fixing the referents of its pronouns and demonstratives can thereby be thought as meaningful even once the references are fixed in ways that cross category boundaries. Such a strategy would be question-begging if used against an account like the one sketched in this section, where nonsense amounts (roughly) to lack of informational content.

[11] In some such cases, the thinker either embellishes the mental sentence or the uttered sentence by interpreting it in a loose way so that, ultimately, what is being assented to or asserted by the sentence involves information that the concepts deployed do not themselves semantically encode. Upon hearing, for instance, "John's toothbrush was pregnant", the hearer can embellish what is said by conceiving of John's toothbrush as come alive (as in a cartoon) and some part of this new entity being distended in the way a pregnant female's belly is. Our minds can do this, and it's great that they can, but I do not consider the embellished scenario a faithful literal interpretation of the sentence "John's toothbrush was pregnant."

one takes propositions to be representational or not. Theorists who take propositions to be non-representational identify them with states of affairs (Richard (2013); Speaks (2014)).[12] Theorists who take them to be representational identify them either with types of mental acts (Soames 2010, 2014) or with structured relations that have the extrinsic dispositional property of being cognized in certain ways (King 2007, 2009, 2014). In the rest of this section I describe a version of each of the two conceptions and discuss how they might accommodate nonsense.[13]

2.1. *Propositions as States of Affairs & Nonsense*

One way to think of the contents of sentences and propositional attitudes is as states of affairs. This view has surfaced intermittently over the last few decades,[14] however the identification of propositions with states of affairs has only received its most recent statement in Richard (2013). States of affairs are variously glossed by Richard as possibilities, ways things could be, and more specifically, as properties of situations. Richard summarizes the view as follows: "States of affairs are certain properties, ones picked out by terms of the form *the property of being a situation in which the objects o1, … , on instantiate the properties p1,…, pj in way I*" (Richard 2013: 704). On this view, the objects, properties and relations that are the semantic contents of a sentence are unified into a proposition by being parts of a state of affairs, i.e. by being parts of a complex property of situations. As Richard emphasizes, some sentences represent states of affairs that obtain ("it's raining in Chicago"), some represent states of affairs that do not obtain ("Paris is north of London"), while some represent states of affairs that could not possibly obtain ("Water is not H2O").

My contention is that on this account, category mistakes can be

[12] I do not mean to suggest that Richard and/or Speaks are the first philosophers to advocate that propositions are states of affairs. The history of the discussion of the nature of propositions has a long history. I am working with their accounts because they present the most recent formulations of this sort of theory.

[13] This division is not meant to be exhaustive, as some content theorists reject propositions altogether. See Jubien (2001), Simchen (2013), among others. It is not clear however that rejecting propositionalism requires one to adopt a revolutionary attitude towards category mistakes. As I argue in section (2.2) below, even on a no-propositions view on which every sentence has a truth-value computed on the basis of the semantic values of its component expressions, it can still be appropriate to speak of how things are represented by that sentence. This in turn requires there to be a state of affairs made up from those semantic values that either obtains or fails to obtain (either actually or necessarily). A sentence fails to express a proposition, as before, if there is no such corresponding state of affairs.

[14] Here's Fodor in an article from 1984: "The paradigmatic representation relation […] holds between things of the sorts that have truth values and things of the sorts by which truth values are determined. I shall usually refer to the latter as "states of affairs", and I'll use '-ing nominals' as canonical forms for expressing them (e.g., 'John's going to the store'; 'Mary's kissing Bill'; 'Sam's being twelve years old next Tuesday')" (233).

seen as marking a distinctive sort of failure, whereby a sentence or thought fails to represent *any* state of affairs. What this amounts to saying is that there can be no state of affairs, e.g. of Caesar's being prime. This is not a matter of there being a state of affairs corresponding to the sentence, albeit one that merely does not (or even cannot possibly) obtain. Were this so, the sentence would be false or necessarily false rather than nonsensical. Rather, category mistakes have *no correlate whatsoever* in what we might call metaphysical (or perhaps even logical) space, even when this space is expanded to include impossibilities. Why might this be?

There are two reasons for thinking that category mistakes fail to express propositions on the current view, depending on whether we focus on the relation of expressing or whether we focus on what is being expressed. The first reason is the more roundabout of the two. Recall that on the present view propositions are states-of-affairs, but to think a thought with a certain state-of-affairs as its content is to represent that state of affairs. Presumably a sentence expresses a state of affairs if it is possible (at least in principle, for someone) to represent the state of affairs that it expresses. But what is it to represent Caesar as being prime? Worse yet, what is it to represent aluminum as having divorced democracy? Here the answer that suggests itself is that the failure of a sentence S to *express* a proposition is tied to a failure on the part of language users to produce a unified thought that combines radically disparate subject-concepts and predicate-concepts.

The second and stronger reason to think there can be no states of affairs corresponding to category mistakes might be worked out by appeal to the essential properties of states of affairs.[15] It is difficult to believe that the mere fact that we can combine words and concepts in certain ways implies that there is such a thing as Caesar's being prime, or the number six's being taller than a can of soup. States of affairs are, as per Richard's definition above, are properties such as the property of being a situation in which some object instantiates some property. But it is reasonable to think that the range of situations is limited by what kinds of properties it is possible for the objects to instantiate.

Something is human (or something is a number) in virtue of the essential properties it possesses. Suppose that I think a thought corresponding to the English sentence "Caesar is baking the number 2". What state of affairs would this putative thought represent? Whatever else, the state of affairs has to be one that contains Caesar and the number two, and be such that the former stands to the latter in the relation of *baking*. But there is no such relation that holds together such relata, and hence no such state of affairs.

The obvious response to this line is to claim that what goes for "Caesar is baking the number 2" goes for all false (or: necessarily false)

[15] Westerhoff suggests this as an option in his monograph, *Ontological Categories* (2005: 94).

sentences.[16] Consider "John is taller than Sally", uttered in a context where Sally is actually taller than John. Isn't it essential to the being-taller-than relation that it holds of x and y only when x exceeds y in height? Yes, that's why the sentence is false, since Sally and John are not related in the way that the sentence says they are. Recall that, on the current picture, to say a sentence is false is to say that the state of affairs it expresses does not obtain, and so we are saying *of a certain relation* that it does not actually hold. Likewise, to say that a sentence is necessarily false is to say that the state of affairs it expresses cannot possibly obtain, which is not to deny that there is such a state of affairs, only that it does not obtain in any possible circumstance. The situation is different with respect to the sentence "Caesar bakes the number two" since no relation between a person and a number *could be a baking relation.* As such, the case of category mistakes can be differentiated from that of necessarily false sentences since in the latter there is a relation that is expressed albeit one that fails to hold of necessity. In the former case there is no relation that may be said to fail to hold. Relations, like objects, have essential properties (or essences). Much of the problem posed by the distinction between category mistakes and necessarily false sentences is due to the tightly bound relation between what is essential and what is necessary.

The possibility of constructing the syntactic string "Caesar bakes the number 2" creates the illusion that we are representationally carving out a possibility, when we are not actually latching onto anything at all. Contrast this with a non-cross-categorial sentence representing an impossible state of affairs, e.g. "my jacket is both completely blue and completely green". In this latter instance, a state of affairs is represented, although no situation can possibly instantiate it. The option we are currently surveying maintains that facts about the essential properties of objects and relations set the boundary for what states of affairs there can be (regardless of whether or not they obtain). Limitations on the constructability of states of affairs are plausibly seen as generated by constraints on what kinds of objects can instantiate what kinds of properties and relations. Importantly, properties specific to spatio-temporal concrete individuals cannot be ascribed to abstract objects and vice versa.

One pressing concern stems from the fact that category mistakes have their own peculiar phenomenology. There is something that it is like to process a cross-categorial sentence, a certain oddness or funniness to it. Yet this feel is often missing when we process negated or otherwise modalized cross-categorial sentences, such as "the number two couldn't have moved next door to us" or, less extravagantly, "Caesar isn't a prime number". Now, on the state of affairs theory of

[16] The first response of this sort is found in Quine's *Word and Object* (1960: 229). There, Quine argues that it is simpler to take cross-categorial strings to be false rather than nonsensical on the assumption that we cannot non-arbitrarily distinguish category mistakes from contradictions.

propositions discussed, a sentence is false (and its negation is true) at a context if the state of affairs it expresses fails to obtain there. But if cross-categorial sentences fail to express states of affairs then it is not clear how to explain the oddness asymmetry and the fact that "Caesar isn't a prime number" isn't only lacking in oddness, but strikes us as patently true. But one reason this claim strikes us as true is likely that we interpret it as saying that "prime number" is not a property that it makes sense to ascribe to Caesar, not that it is a property that Caesar lacks, like a decent haircut or a thin nose.

I've assumed throughout this discussion that states of affairs are not, contra Richard's gloss on their nature, possibilities. I needed to do so in order to draw the distinction between necessarily false sentences and category mistakes. This move is independently motivated since Richard, and presumably all other content theorists, want to hold that meaningful sentences can express propositions that could not possibly obtain (i.e. are necessarily false).

2.2. *Propositions as Types of Acts & Nonsense*

Unlike Richard, Scott Soames argues that we should think of propositions as types of cognitive acts that agents perform. More specifically, he identifies the proposition *that snow is white* with the cognitive act type of *predicating* whiteness of snow. On this picture, to say that two agents entertain the same proposition (e.g. that snow is white) is to say that they each engage in a cognitive act of predicating whiteness of snow. Soames takes predication to be a primitive, not further analyzable notion.

Unfortunately, it is not very clear how the propositions-as-act-types proposal fits in with the view that cross-categorial strings fail to express propositions. Since propositions are identified with types of acts, to say that a sentence fails to express a proposition amounts to saying that there is no type of act of the relevant sort. To return to our running example, to say that "Caesar is prime" does not express a proposition is to say that there is no type of act of predicating *being prime* of Caesar. At first glance, this result looks problematic, since it is not clear what kind of story we might run to explain why some properties are predicable of certain objects while others are not.

To see why one nonetheless might be inclined to think that cross-categorial strings fail to express propositions on this view, it is helpful to consider how Soames's account is supposed to be an improvement over the view that propositions are set-theoretic objects. The central reason, according to Soames, is that the account is able to accommodate what many take to be a central feature of propositions, namely that they represent. What makes the type of act of predicating whiteness of snow a proposition is that in performing instances of that act type agents *represent snow as white*. This suggests a natural reason for thinking that cross-categorial strings do not express propositions since

(presumably) agents do not or *can*not represent e.g. Caesar *as* prime or *as* a bijective function or *as* baking numbers. Agents cannot represent these things because these are not ways that Caesar can be. At the very least, it must be clarified what it means to say that someone represents Caesar in these ways. Baking a cake, for instance is an activity. If someone says or thinks, "Joe is baking gingerbread cookies," that person represents Joe as engaging is a certain sort of activity. But does this commit us to claiming that thinking "Caesar is baking the number three" also involves representing Caesar as engaging in an activity, perhaps a quixotic one? That is as least far from obvious. The very notion of representing presupposes that something is being represented, e.g. the act of predicating whiteness of snow is an instance of a proposition because in this act snow is represented as being white. While this does not assume that it is either physically or even logically possible for snow to be white, (it can be meaningful to talk about impossibilities after all as mentioned in the previous subsection), what it does assume is that there is a way in which things are characterized as being. That is to say, it assumes that snow's being white is a state of affairs. From a slightly different angle, to say that an agent represents o as F requires us to assume that there is some standard of correctness that a representation can approximate to a greater or lesser degree. However in the cases we are considering here we are not dealing with ways that the individuals under consideration can be.

Ultimately, whether we take propositions to be states of affairs, or whether we take them to be types of acts, there must be such states in all cases where something is represented as being a certain way. We cannot represent a as F unless there is such a thing as *a's being F*. For reasons discussed in the previous subsection, this creates an opening for how we might understand the content failures that are specific to category mistakes.

It has been the burden of this section to show that failure to express a unified proposition might provide a reasonable way to distinguish between what counts as nonsense and what doesn't. I turn now to consider some reasons Elizabeth Camp has offered for resisting the Reactionary thesis and for adopting a Revolutionary attitude instead.

3. *Camp and the Generalized Generality Constraint*

Camp argues that cross-categorial strings (i.e. category mistakes) are not nonsensical as Reactionaries would have it. On her view, what makes such strings significant is that they "can express thoughts; and competent thinkers both are able to grasp these and ought to be able to" (Camp 2004: 209). In particular, what such cross-categorial strings express are propositional thoughts, which are composed out of concepts, with both the thoughts and their constituent concepts being individuated by their possession-conditions. Furthermore, the conditions for both concept and thought possession are cashed out in terms

of the inferences such concepts and thoughts can participate in. As she puts it, "[part] of what it is for someone to possess a concept, on this view, is for that concept to be fully caught up in a network of potential thoughts—for it to combine generally with the thinker's other concepts (subject, that is, to a mental analogue of being syntactically well formed)" (Camp, 2004: 210). By focusing on the conceptual level Camp turns the discussion of the meaningfulness of cross-categorial strings into a discussion of the acceptability of Gareth Evans' Generality Constraint:

(**GC**) If a subject can be credited with the thought that a is F, then he must have the conceptual resources for entertaining the thought that a is G, for every property of being G of which he has a conception.

Now Evans himself was not a Revolutionary in the sense presently under discussion and, as Camp notes, he qualifies (GC) in a footnote, by adding "with a proviso about the *categorical appropriateness* of the predicates to the subjects" (Evans as cited in Camp 2004: 212).[17] It is precisely this proviso that Camp aims to undermine.

Camp's argument for the unconstrained generality of (GC) relies on thinkers' capacity to deploy cross-categorial strings in material reasoning by drawing inferences to and from them. This capacity, by itself, she takes to provide evidence of the meaningfulness of such strings. Among her examples, she considers the following inferences from (3) to (4) and (3) to (5):

(3) Caesar is a prime number.
(4) Caesar lacks efficacy.
(5) Caesar could not be an effective emperor.

Neither of these last two sentences is a cross-categorial string, which thwarts the objection that all such inferences might suffer from the same "categorical inappropriateness" as the original from which they are inferred. Nor are the inferences purely formal, rather they are material. String (4) follows from (3) only given some knowledge of what it means to be a prime number, unlike

(6) Something is a prime number.

Nevertheless, Camp thinks that the material inferences only achieve their desired effect (of displaying the meaningfulness of (3)) once we take a bit *more* on board than pure inferentialism.[18] In her words "[it] does seem that some referential component is also essential for full understanding" (Camp 2004: 222). Precisely what the nature of this referential component might be however is left unclear. She continues,

> But I need not hold the view that grasping inferential role is all there is to concept possession. By hypothesis, the thinker under consideration, because supposedly otherwise competent with respect to the constituent con-

[17] For the original citation see Evans (1982: 101).

[18] Where pure inferentialism presumably is the view that the meaning of some thought [t] is constituted entirely by its inferential liaisons.

> cepts, does meet any such additional requirements for concept possession. (Camp 2004: 222)

To sum up, cross-categorial strings should be counted as significant, according to Camp, insofar as they possess substantial inferential roles, and speakers actually make use of these inferential roles, for instance when processing metaphors.

How should the Reactionary respond? One general worry about Camp's strategy is that there can be strings which agents internalize and from which they can draw seemingly reasonable inferences *even in cases where the string in question is itself nonsensical* on account of containing terms that lack a unique semantic content relative to their linguistic community. That is to say, as long as there exists Type I nonsense, and Camp concedes this much, than her argument from material inferences would reveal those sentences to be meaningful. If so, then it simply isn't true that the inferential liaisons of a putative thought suffice for rendering it meaningful.

More centrally, there appears to be a significant tension internal to Camp's argument. As mentioned, she does not subscribe to a pure inferentialism, which she rightly fears would not allow for conceptual mastery. This is not supposed to raise any serious worry however, since Camp tells us that the agents she is considering possess *standard conceptions* of the terms in cross-categorial strings. The problem is that Camp seems to want to use inferentialism for the purpose of allowing the inferences in question to give meaning to the cross-categorial strings, yet those very inferences would only be drawn by an agent if the agent's conception of the referent (e.g. "Caesar", "prime number") is non-standard or doesn't come into play at all.[19] Consider for instance just one of the resources Camp draws on: Someone can meaningfully ask, "Is Caesar a prime number?" But this cannot serve Camp's intended purpose of testifying to the meaningfulness of "Caesar is a prime number" because only someone lacking a standard conception of "Caesar" would sincerely ask the question. What this shows is that there is a tension between being conceptually competent and accepting cross-categorial sentences. Again, consider the slightly more elaborate case from above, i.e. the inference from (3) to (4):

(3) Caesar is a prime number.
(4) Caesar lacks efficacy.

Camp claims that being able to draw such inferences is required for being fully competent. To the contrary, I claim that drawing such inferences reveals that one does not possess some of the relevant concepts. Inferring from (3) to (4) has absolutely nothing to do with Caesar. If the agent does possess a standard conception of Caesar, it should be pretty clear that the inference from (3) to (4) is itself a purely formal manipulation. My contention is that there is no foreseeable way to re-

[19] Or at least so weak that they merely mimic concept possession.

solve this tension in a non-question-begging way, i.e. in a way that does not ultimately either resort to pure inferentialism or to reliance on non-competent language users.

4. *Magidor's Defense*

In this section I take up the task of critically assessing some of the central arguments of the most resolute Revolutionary in recent literature, Ofra Magidor. While she advances numerous arguments in the revolutionary vein, only two of these concerns precisely the sort of content-centered account that I have been discussing. I argue that none of those arguments provide reasonable grounds for taking category mistakes to be meaningful. My reply to the first argument however is indirect since I rely on the negative consequence that Magidor's argumentative strategy would preclude the possibility that there is Type I nonsense not just Type II.[20] Let's turn to those arguments now.

4.1. *Argument from Propositional Attitude Ascriptions*

The first argument that Magidor advances against content theories relies on the fact that category mistakes can occur in propositional attitude ascriptions, one of her examples being, "John believes that the theory of relativity is eating breakfast." This sentence appears meaningful, and if it is, then it must be composed of meaningful parts. Since "the theory of relativity is eating breakfast" is part of the sentence, it follows that *it* too is meaningful. *Prima facie*, this is a strong argument. My strategy for defusing it is to argue, as I did in response to the synonymy argument, that it is too strong.

Consider a pair of empty terms, "amphidentric" and "quarthidentric" that I make up in order to teach my students an important lesson about language. Suppose that, in a lecture, I deploy these terms many times, and dramatically argue that things that are amphidentric cannot possibly be quarthidentric. After class is over, Sam says to Jordan: "Wow! Our prof really believes quite strongly that nothing can be both amphidentric and quarthidentric." Surely we understand, in some sense what Sam *said*. Nevertheless, the 'that'-clause Sam used fails to express a proposition, and thereby is not truth-evaluable. I think this suffices to show that the argument from propositional attitude ascriptions is suspect. Not all that-clauses need to express propositions, some can merely appear to do so.

[20] A key target here is Herman Cappelen who accepts Type I nonsense while also claiming to be convinced by Magidor's arguments that category mistakes are meaningful (Cappelen 2013).

4.2. *Argument from Metaphor*

Magidor's final argument is to claim that processing the literal meaning of many category mistakes is necessary because they are metaphors. Her strategy is to divide up theories of metaphor into ones which require category mistakes to be meaningful and those which do not and show that the former candidates are more promising than the latter. The theories that she takes to be most successful are Gricean theories which assimilate metaphorical meaning to conversational implicatures and Davidson's non-cognitivism which denies metaphorical meanings exist. Grasping the literal meaning of a cross-categorial metaphor is crucial, on Gricean theories, in order to commence the process of exploring alternative implied meanings that could be intended. Literal meanings are crucial on the Davidsonian picture, because the relevant sentences do not have any other meanings. While I think that metaphors pose an interesting and important problem, I do not think that the argument in any way decisively rules out the Reactionary account.

To see why, let's consider as an example the metaphor that forms the core example of Lepore and Stone's discussion in chapter 4 of their recent book *Imagination and Convention*: "Love is a snowmobile racing through the tundra" (2015). What generates the metaphorical meaning here? If we suppose, with Lepore and Stone that uses of metaphorical language prompt analogical thinking, the question remains open as to whether this process begins with processing of the literal meaning of the metaphor or not. For the Gricean, the hearer grasps the literal content of the utterance, namely the proposition *that love is a snowmobile racing through the tundra*. The speaker then presumably realizes that this proposition is trivially false, inappropriate, etc. As a result, the hearer infers that the speaker intended one or more other propositions to be grasped. But this is not the only way of proceeding. Another option is to hold that the hearer interprets the sentence without thereby coming to believe the proposition, i.e. despite not being able to represent love *as* a snowmobile's journey, which prompts her to search for analogies between love and a snowmobile's journey that might make sense. For the Reactionary thesis proponent while speakers do grasp a proposition, they do have a metalinguistic understanding of the cross-categorial sentence: they understand that the speaker ascribes the property of being a snowmobile to love. It is unclear why this cannot suffice in generating the search for alternatives or the analogical thinking processes. For the Davidsonian on the other hand, there are no metaphorical meanings, but this does not automatically entail that the sentence must express a proposition unless we have independent reasons to hold this view. If I am correct, then we can resist this conclusion, arguing that the sentences fail to express unified propositions.

4.3. *Argument from Partial Propositions*

A more pressing worry stems from a very different sort of argument Magidor launches in the fourth chapter of her book (2013: 81–89). Here is the structure of her argument there:

i. Either we hold that category mistakes express propositions that are truth-valueless, or we hold that they fail to express propositions and are truth-valueless.
ii. If we hold the second of these positions (as the account I have embraced requires), then we are committed to the existence of partial propositions, propositions that are true at some worlds and lack a truth-value at others. She uses as example the sentence "The thing I am thinking of is green," where the definite description is understood to function as a non-rigid singular term. Now, while in actuality the definite description picks out a table, in some other possible world w* it may very well pick out the number two, since that is the thing I am thinking of there.
iii. But Magidor deploys a modalized version of an argument advanced by Williamson[21] to show that a proposition cannot lack a truth-value at any possible world.
iv. But then w* cannot be a world where the proposition is neither true nor false. So the proposition must be truth-valued even in w*

One thing to note about this argument is that it might have independently unpalatable consequences if it generalizes to the case of contingent semantic paradoxes, as Magidor notes in her footnote 15 (2013: 88). Another option that might be worth pursuing is to deny that the view I defend commits me to accepting that claim that the proposition expressed by "The thing that I am thinking of is green" is truth-valueless at w*. What Magidor shows is that the modalized version of The Williamson argument requires us to deny that a proposition can fail to have a truth-value at some possible world, but this is not the situation with w*, since w* is not a world where the proposition fails to have a truth-value, but rather a world where it fails to be a proposition.

5. *Conclusion*

The focus of the paper has been on the most worrisome candidate for qualifying as nonsense, namely category mistakes. I have attempted to show that there is room for the view that such sentences are indeed nonsensical, and described the kind of content-failure that they might

[21] The argument as stated in Magidor's *Category Mistakes* goes as follows (2013: 87):
(NT) Necessarily, the proposition that p is true if and only if p.
(NF) Necessarily, the proposition that p is false if and only if not p.
(1) Possibly, the proposition that p is not true and the proposition that p is not false.
(2) Therefore, (2) Possibly, not p and not not p.

involve, and attempted to fend off some general attacks raised against this sort of view.

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