Sense, Nonsense, and Context
The New Wittgenstein and Charles Travis’ Wittgenstein

Introduction. John McDowell’s conventional sense

Most commentators on Frege, at least those I am here interested in -Gareth Evans and John McDowell- inherit a so-called “Fregean” understanding of the notion of sense, a notion of “sense” which is as strictly referential and propositional. Whether or not this is the best way to understand Frege is not my present concern. I think such an understanding is both interesting and problematic, however. That is why, for the sake of this paper, I seek to examine this concept of “sense” which, to my mind, informs the interpretation of some of the most important philosophical works of the 20th century, those of Wittgenstein in particular. I seek to clarify Wittgenstein’s notion of “sense” and “nonsense” in order to understand if Wittgenstein’s sense is indeed strictly propositional and conceptual and if, contrary to many of these readings, we can indeed speak of criteria for nonsense. To this end, I would like to consider some aspects of the “resolute reading” of Wittgenstein, especially that presented in Cora Diamond’s work. Furthermore, I also intend to explore the philosophical concept of “reason” and its relation to the notion of “sense”. My ultimate concern in examining the nature of “sense” and “nonsense” in Wittgenstein is the question of the limits and of possible explanations of “sense” and “nonsense”.

Before beginning my discussion of Wittgenstein’s “resolute readers”, more precisely of Cora Diamond’s reading of Wittgenstein, I would like to examine the notion of “sense” in as found in John McDowell’s work. Indeed, I think McDowell's understanding is especially clear, so it makes for a good starting point.

According to McDowell, the notion of “reason” is neither an a priori notion nor a logical one. There is no “natural reason” in McDowell. To be more precise, in McDowell, there is no rational predetermination that could determine our linguistic or practical uses. On the contrary, for McDowell, only our uses have sense and are able to structure the notion of reason. McDowell’s paper dedicated to the uses of proper names, “On the Sense and the Reference of a Proper Name” is particularly helpful in bringing this out1. In this text, McDowell outlines the notion of

“criterion” in a very interesting way. In criticizing Michael Dummett’s position, McDowell argues there are no *a priori* criteria that determine our applications of the use of a name or a proper name. On the contrary, he claims criteria have to be redefined in a so-called “Wittgensteinian” way, as determined only by preceding uses. I will discuss this thesis as it appears in Cora Diamond and, then, in some works by Charles Travis. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer this thesis as “immanent and internalist”. I would also suggest, and indeed hope to show, that this thesis is not far from being a hermeneutic one.

Let’s take a look at McDowell’s thesis. According to McDowell, as previously mentioned, there is no *a priori* reason that predetermines sense. Nevertheless, it is clear that McDowell’s notion of “sense” is still a rational one; his point is just that there is no external reason capable of organizing sense. In fact, I think McDowell presents a striking redefinition of the concept of reason. To put it very briefly, something is rational if it can afford some justifications and some criteria. To understand this notion of “criteria” and its rational character, we should take a look at McDowell’s “Criteria, Defeasibility and Knowledge”. In this 1982 text, McDowell sharply criticizes Wright’ and Kripke’s skeptical reading of Wittgenstein. Contrary to their accounts, McDowell aims to show that reason is in fact at work in Wittgensteinian grammar and that brings criteria of justification to our understanding and to our actions. On McDowell’s account, there are no rational criteria external to sense, because only sense itself is able to provide these criteria. He thus redefines the notion of criterion in pragmatic and conventional terms, and this redefinition implies that only our preceding uses – understood as regular ones – are able to establish new rational criteria. This strategy has to be explained in greater detail. According to McDowell, the skeptical readers of Wittgenstein are right about one point: they understand very well that Wittgenstein’s criteria are *not a priori* but are rather conventional and grammatical. As McDowell rightly claims:

“It is widely believed that in his later work Wittgenstein introduced a special use of the notion of criterion. In this proprietary use, “criteria” are supposed to be a kind of evidence. Their status as evidence, unlike that of symptoms, is a matter of “convention” or “grammar” rather than empirical theory.”

Nevertheless, McDowell strongly rejects the skeptical conclusions of these skeptical readers. Wittgenstein’s criteria are conventional and grammatical, but they are not, as a result, “defeasable”. For McDowell, it is clear that these criteria are still objective and rational ones. As I

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2 Dummett M., 1976: 36.
4 op.cit, p.369.
mentioned previously, his strategy for showing this may be described as an “immanent” and “internal” one. McDowell intends to prove that such criteria are rational because they are practically grounded as a result of the regularity and the systematicity of our uses: only our preceding uses are able to provide the criteria that will determine the future applications.

McDowell’s argument is based on comments Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations especially §354:

§354: The fluctuation in grammar between criteria and symptom makes it look as if there were nothing at all but symptoms. We say, for example: «Experience teaches that there is rain when the barometer falls, but it also teaches that there is rain when we have certain sensations of wet and cold, or such-and-such visual impressions.» In defense of this one says that there these sense-impressions can deceive us. But here one fails to reflect that the fact that the false appearance is precisely one of rain is founded on a definition.

McDowell remarks on §354 of the Philosophical Investigations in the following way:

«Commentators often take this to imply that when our senses deceive us, criteria for rain are satisfied, although no rain is falling. But what the passage says is surely just this: for things, say, to look certain way to us is, as a matter of «definition» (or «convention», PI, §355), for it to look to us as though it is raining; it would be a mistake to suppose that the «sense-impressions» yield the judgment that it is raining merely symptomatically – that arriving at the judgment is mediated by an empirical theory. […] when our «sense-impressions» deceive us, the fact is not that criteria for rain are satisfied but that they appear to be satisfied.»

McDowell believes skeptical readers such as Wright and Kripke are mistaken as to the nature of these criteria. On McDowell’s view, these criteria are grounded by the regularity of our precedent uses (“the barometer falls”, “certain sensations of wet and cold”, etc.). When theses criteria are established, however, they become indefeasible “definitions”. If my criteria appear to be satisfied despite the fact that there is no rain, it is not my definition of the criteria that is at fault: I have just misapplied them (maybe my barometer was broken or there was just some sprinkle of water and I thought it was rain, etc.). It is still clear however, that when my criteria are correctly applied, they are reliable and can determine what it rain and what is not rain. On my view, however a determination of this kind would appear to be “self-determining”. Only the fact of the regularity of my previous uses determines future applications.

This “self-regulation” that determines applications is also a self-regulation of sense. The criteria of the correction of my uses as those of the relevance of the context are only determined by the expected use. So, if the context is not appropriate for the criteria (for instance, an equatorial rain doesn’t exactly correspond to the same context as an a English drizzle), the criteria don’t have to be changed; one just has to find the relevant context to apply them. Thus context is not

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6 op.cit., p.381-382
understood as a potential way of redefining the criteria. The context is just understood as an extension of the uses. And only these uses are normative, not the context. One just has to apply them in a relevant way.

So, McDowell’s notion of reason is a conventional and criteriological one. “Reason” is less the basis of “sense” than “sense” – that is to say our relevant uses- is the basis of the “reason”. These self-determining of uses are the sole source of rational relations. To put it another way, it is not so much that sense has a rational foundation but rather that reason has a foundation in sense. McDowell defends also a practical, internal and potentially unlimited notion of sense.

Now that I have presented McDowell’s position, as I understand it, I come to the main question of my talk: is this practical, internal and unlimited approach to sense – this so-called “Fregean” notion - really a Wittgensteinian one? In order to answer this question, I hope to attempt a different way understanding the concepts of sense, nonsense and reason. First, I will examine Cora Diamond’s account. Then, I will take up some criticisms made by Charles Travis. More specifically, I hope to critique the conception of sense as unlimited. Along these same lines, I hope to ask if there might not be some rational criteria that would limit sense. I will also examine the notion of context, arguing that it is not only a holistic and conventional principle. I hope to show that context can acts as a real constraint of sense. Through this redefinition, I hope to show that the notion of reason itself has to be redefined: not in naturalist or conventionalist terms but in realist and contextual ones.

1. Sense and Nonsense: Cora Diamond’s resolute reading

In “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge”, John McDowell defends a very specific conception of “reason”. This notion of reason can be found throughout his work and is neither naturalist nor a priori. Briefly, a meaning or practice is rational if one can find some justification of them through fixed criteria. These criteria cannot be predetermined by formal logic; they are practical and conventional. According to McDowell, these criteria form the logic of sense and are in turn determined by this logic which is why I refer to this logic of sense an “internal” one. A meaning or use has a sense if I know how to use it appropriately. Indeed, this notion of sense seems to be a pragmatic one in that something has a sense only if given one by the user.

I now hope to show the ways Wittgenstein’s “resolute readers”, especially Cora Diamond, have inherited this “McDowellian” approach to sense.
a. Unlimited Sense and Nonsense. The non-naturalist “Frege-Wittgenstein view”

I will now examine Cora Diamond’s paper “What Nonsense Might Be”\(^7\) in order to investigate the legacy of McDowell’s thinking on these matters. Diamond tries to show that, according to the “Frege-Wittgenstein view”, there is no natural or positive concept of nonsense to be found in Wittgenstein. Nonsense is not the same as an error: nonsense is not an error of application of some logical rules that would otherwise determine the sense of an expression.

Let’s take a look at Diamond’s text. Diamond is here responding to distinctions made by Annette Baier in her article on “Nonsense” in the Encyclopedia of Philosophy. More specifically, Diamond considers type (3) and type (5) of Baier’s taxonomy of nonsense. According to Baier, nonsense of (3) is a “category error” and nonsense of type (5) is a case of a “respectable sentence” in which “one or more words (but not too many)” are replaced “by nonsense words”. According to Diamond, however, these two putatively different species of nonsense are in fact quite similar. She considers two examples in her critique of Baier’s distinction. The first is from Carnap: “Caesar is a prime number”, and apparent case of type (3) nonsense and a second, from Moore: “Scott kept a runcible at Abbotsford”, thought to illustrate type (5).

Diamond’s first recommendation is that we not follow Baier in considering type (3) nonsense as a “category error”. Following what she calls “the Frege-Wittgenstein view”, if the sentence: “Caesar is a prime number” is nonsense, “Caesar” and “prime number” don’t have a sense either, in this case. The nonsense doesn’t result from someone ascribing the wrong category to, for instance, a proper name: it is not the result of ascribing to a proper name (“Caesar”) the wrong predicate (“prime number”). Diamond rejects this explanation. Her argument here is very close to McDowell’s in « On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name” – perhaps not coincidentally, since they share a common adversary in Michael Dummett. Indeed, in his article, McDowell rejects the idea that the use of a proper name can be determined by \textit{a priori} logical rules. In parallel fashion, Diamond criticizes the hypothesis of a logic that made use of preexisting categories. She rejects an understanding of sense or nonsense which she here calls a “natural view”:

> “the Natural view: whether a sentence makes sense or not is functionally dependent on its parts, on their logical category. This is reflected in the idea of expressions that can be substituted for each other in some or all contexts \textit{salva congruitate}, as they say. More particularly, the idea is that nonsense of type 3 is functionally explicable.”\(^8\)

This quotation makes Diamond’s argument clear. She intends to reject any “natural” and

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categorical logic of sense, in particular, she refuses the idea that sense and nonsense could be explained in terms of categories. According to Diamond, and to Wittgenstein’s “resolute readers”⁹, this refutation rests on Frege’s second principle laid out in the preface to the *Foundations of Arithmetic*¹⁰: the “context principle”. According to the resolute readers, this “context principle” is essential for understanding the notion of “sense” in Wittgenstein. While Diamond’s reading targets naturalist readings of Wittgenstein (in particular Dummett’s), she also intends to suggest in a much more positive way a new and original way to read Wittgenstein, specifically that Wittgenstein should be read in continuity with Frege. Frege’s “context principle” is also at work in Wittgenstein. Let me quote the three Fregean principles:

- “always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective”;
- “never to ask for the meaning of a word in isolation, but only in the context of a proposition”;
- “never to lose sight of the distinction between concept and object”.

The second of these principles: the “context principle” stipulates that it is impossible to determine the sense of a word in a categorical way. The sense of the words “Caesar” or “Russell” cannot be determined as proper names without adequate context. Diamond develops many examples in her exposition of the principle. For instance, her example of “Shirley Temple”: in some contexts, Shirley Temple is the name of a drinking others, the name of a person. In another example, she notes that the word “Parkison” doesn’t have the same sense in the sentences “Smith has Parkinson’s hat” and “Smith has Parkinson’s disease.”¹¹ Such examples, though trivial, show very clearly there is no sense without context.

Context is here conceived as holistic and semantic: a word has a sense only in a sentence and then only if the sentence has a sense. So, if “Caesar is a prime number” is nonsense, none of the words of this sentence could have a sense. In this sentence, according to Diamond, the word “Caesar” lacks a sense, as does the word “runcible” in Moore’s example. Diamond’s position is very clearly summarized in following quotation:

> “The Frege-Wittgenstein view does not take any kind of nonsense to be functionally dependent on the categories of the terms combined in a sentence. […] The word does not have a category assigned to it which it brings with it into whatever context. This is not to say

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⁹ For instance, cf. Diamond C., « Throwing Away the Ladder: How to Read the *Tractatus* » in *The Realistic Spirit*, op.cit.;
- Conant J. and Diamond C. « On reading the *Tractatus* resolutely: reply to Meredith Williams and Peter Sullivan » in *Wittgenstein’s Lasting Significance*, Routledge, 2004;
- “The Method of the *Tractatus*” in *From Frege to Wittgenstein, Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2002;
¹¹ Such examples are quoted from op.cit. p.136 and p.135.
that words are not assigned to categories, but that the identification of a word in a particular sentence as playing a certain role there, as meaning a certain kind of thing, cannot be read directly by rules.”

As this quotation shows, for Diamond, the sense of a word is not determined by logical and a priori rules. Nevertheless, the determination of the sense of a word is of course possible. Such a determination is enabled by certain pragmatic rules. These rules are flexible and are subject to change because they are determined only by our uses. They are not necessarily conventional – (this is perhaps a fundamental difference between Diamond and McDowell). It is still possible that I might decide, for instance, that the number “2” is my lucky number and I choose, for whatever reason, to give it the nickname “Caesar”. With this redefinition, in conjunction to my actual use, the sentence “Caesar is a prime number” would have a sense. This example illustrates how specific Diamond’s understanding of the notion of “sense” is. In her view, “sense” is a holistic notion. Sense is necessarily a pragmatic and a perspectival one. The sentence “Caesar is a prime number” has a sense only if I am able to use it. No logical explanations can replace these pragmatic criteria. And there are no other ways of determining and of limiting the sense than actual use. So, it would seem this understanding of sense is still an internalist one. According to this reading, sense has no other limit than the limit of my potential uses, which are in fact quite unlimited.

Before criticizing these positions, I would like to ask what sort of understanding of “reason” is still available for Wittgenstein’s resolute readers, or at least for Diamond, given that, according to her, there is no limit on sense.

b. A realistic « reason »?

I have tried to show that neither Diamond nor McDowell would accept the idea of reason as providing a foundation for sense. In Diamond, “sense” and “nonsense” are not ultimately explainable. We just use sense, which arises out of practices. More precisely, the idea that sense is not explainable becomes the background for a new definition of realism or, at least, of what Cora Diamond calls of the “realistic spirit”. This redefinition of the empirical notion of reason is a fundamental part of the “New Wittgenstein” view. Diamond’s article “Realism and the Realistic Spirit” introduces this conceptual reformulation.

In this well-known article, Diamond distinguishes how Wittgenstein’s method can be distinguished from an empirical one. Diamond’s argument centers on a quotation from

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12 op.cit, p.104.
Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*\(^\text{14}\) which was directed against Ramsey\(^\text{15}\):

“Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is the hardest thing.”\(^\text{16}\) In laying out her argument, Diamond makes use of a distinction introduced by Berkeley in the *Three Dialogues*\(^\text{17}\). These dialogues introduce Hylas, a materialist, and Philonous, who, for Diamond, represents the “realistic spirit”:

“Look! Are not the fields covered with a delightful verdure? Is there not something in the woods and groves, in the river and clear springs, that soothes, that delights, that transports the soul?”\(^\text{18}\)

Contrary to Hylas, who tries to get at reality through a set of deforming concepts – in particular through the concept of “matter” – Philonous (“a realistic spirit”) engages with reality directly and doesn’t need any deforming “glasses”\(^\text{19}\) (i.e. some deforming concepts) to perceive or feel reality. On Diamond’s reading, Wittgenstein’s recommendation is similar to Berkeley’s: there is no need of deforming reasons or of a deforming explanation to understand reality. We need only engage reality directly, exactly as Philonous does.

This description of the “realistic spirit” is in particular very critical of Ramsey’s “causal verificationism”. On my view, this critique is very similar to McDowell and Diamond’s critique of the idea that logic of categories could be used to explain the sense of our practices. Contrary to Ramsey, according to Wittgenstein, there are no causal rules that determine our knowledge and our uses.

Diamond’s argument rests on the famous example of a mathematical rule’s application. This example is developed in Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* but also appears elsewhere in Wittgenstein’s corpus, in particular in the *Philosophical Investigations* §§185-201 et passim. According to Diamond, Wittgenstein’s insistence on the fact that we cannot explain or predict how someone will apply a rule, shows that he believes our uses are not determined by rational rules. Indeed, according to Wittgenstein, if I ask someone to continue the series: « − ⋅ − ⋅ − ⋅ − »\(^\text{20}\), nothing would explain why he continues with « − ⋅ − ⋅ − ⋅ − ⋅ − » or « − ⋅ − ⋅ − ⋅ ⋅ ⋅ − ». According to Diamond, this means there is no place for any rational explanation in Wittgenstein.


\(^16\) Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, op.cit, p.325.


\(^19\) According to Diamond, this image of deforming «glasses» is a Wittgenstein’s one. Cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, §103.

\(^20\) This example is a quotation from Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, op.cit, p.320-321.
Diamond also presents, in more positive way, one aspect of Wittgenstein’s method, noting that Wittgenstein prefers an ordinary observation of details to verificationism. Wittgenstein’s famous example of the “mouse in rags” is very explicit:

§51: If I am inclined to suppose that a mouse has come into being by spontaneous generation out of grey rags and dust, I shall do well to examine those rags very closely to see how a mouse may have hidden in them, how it may have got there and so on. But I am convinced that a mouse cannot come into being from these things, then this investigation will perhaps be superfluous.

Wittgenstein here rejects a verificationist solution. In rejecting this theory, Wittgenstein doesn’t recommend looking for an alternative explanation or for the creation of a new set of theoretical concepts, but rather suggests we look at reality, in a direct, practical way: we have to observe it “very closely”.

So Diamond’s reading of Wittgenstein is perhaps more radical than McDowell’s one in certain respects. According to Diamond, there is no need for conventional criteria. On her view, scientific conventions (for instance the belief that there is no ‘spontaneous generation’) go too far in the direction of explanation. Only our uses, founded on our observations of the world, have a sense. This reading of Wittgenstein is obviously compelling and her argumentation convincing. However, is it equally obvious that

“Realism in philosophy, the hardest thing, is open-eyedly giving up the quest for such an elucidation, the demand that a philosophical account of what I mean make clear how it is fixed, out of all possible continuations, out of some real semantic space, which I mean”?

Must we, that is, give up the quest for any rational elucidation? It is clear that Wittgenstein rejects all metaphysical or causal explanations. It seems less certain that Wittgenstein condemns all rational explanation, however. Is it right to conclude, with Diamond, that sense has no rational foundation, no explainable and external foundation and that only our uses can determine this sense? Is the very idea of a rational foundation and a limit to sense a misguided one? In order to answer this question, I would like to characterize more precisely the immanent notion of sense developed by Diamond’s reading to determine if this reading diverges from Wittgenstein in certain important respects.


First of all, I have to concede that many aspects of Diamond’s approach to Wittgenstein’s are insightful and indispensable for understanding Wittgenstein. It seems right, for example, to insist on the fact that the sense is pragmatic and determining in Wittgenstein and on the fact that Wittgenstein refuses all forms of causal verificationism. Wittgenstein is very clear: the hope that

there is always an explanation for everything is one the most frequent errors of philosophy. On Wittgenstein’s view, we have to accept the fact that, sometimes, there is no foundation. Wittgenstein’s very famous §217 is explicit:

§217: "How am I able to obey a rule?" — if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do.
If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”
(Remember that we sometimes demand definitions for the sake not of their content, not of their form. Our requirement is an architectural one; the definition a kind ornamental coping that supports nothing.)

This section is again quite clear. We must accept that there is no justification, and simply accept “the bedrock” that resists any further attempt at justification. Wittgenstein is here much more radical than McDowell suggests. According to Wittgenstein, not only explanations, but also justifications stop at the “bedrock”. Indeed, it seems here that even conventional criteria are irrelevant: “That is simply what I do” is the only possible justification.

Looking at this particular quotation of Wittgenstein, Diamond’s reading seems particularly compelling. It seems that the notion of sense has no rational foundation, and that it is only a pragmatic notion. Nevertheless, I think section §217 also goes against an internalist understanding of the notion of sense. While it is true “That is simply what I do” provides the only foundation for sense, the fact that there is no rational explanation of my use doesn’t imply that the notion of sense is unlimited. On the contrary, §217 stipulates that only the “bedrock”, “hard” enough to twist my “spade” condemns the idea of possible causal explanation. On my view, far from liberating the notion of sense from any potential limits, Wittgenstein is here saying that there is a real limit on sense: this of the real “bedrock”. This “bedrock” provides sense with a much stronger limit than could any causal explanation. If causal explanations are not the relevant ones here, that is precisely because there are other, much stronger regulations and constraints in effect: the limits of the reality that determine and limit our uses.

So, the introduction of this notion of “bedrock” introduces a very important argument: only something external to sense (and not only internal to my uses) could limit it. And only this external entity (reality itself) is able to play this role. That is my hypothesis. So I seek to show, in the following section, that if Wittgenstein rejects the idea of a causal foundation of the notion of sense, it is not equally certain that he also rejects the very idea of a rational foundation of sense. The only way to understand this rational foundation is to reformulate the concept of reason. According to this reformulation, something is rational if it can explain my errors and my failures.
2. The Rational Foundation for Sense in Wittgenstein: A Limited Sense

d. From Frege’s « context principle » to Wittgenstein’s context

It is now necessary to go further into Diamond’s arguments and those of the « the resolute readers » more generally. Diamond and Conant strongly maintain that Wittgenstein’s work has to be understood in “a double continuity”: in terms of a continuity between Frege and Wittgenstein, as well as a continuity between the so-called early and later Wittgenstein. These continuities have to be explained.

According to the resolute readers, the three principles found in the preface of Frege’s Foundations of Arithmetic are still at work in Wittgenstein, and especially in the Wittgenstein of the Investigations. And I think that is a claim with which I completely agree. From the Tractatus logico-philosophicus through the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein maintains the holistic “context principle” as well as a semantic “context principle”: the sense of every term has to be understood in the linguistic context in which it occurs. Sense is a holistic notion and so the notion of “nonsense” can only be explained in terms of a lack of context. Many paragraphs of the Philosophical Investigations confirm this reading of sense and nonsense. For instance the §500:

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

There is such a thing as sense, but only in a holistic and semantic context. There is no sense without some “circulation”. In a similar way, it is also very clear that Wittgenstein extends the limit of sense. There is no positivist limit on sense: only when we cannot find a use for an expression is it rightly called “senseless”. Many paragraphs of the Philosophical Investigations encourage the idea of an unlimited sense or, at least, of its pragmatic limit. One of the most famous is perhaps §23:

§23. But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question, and command ? – They are countless kinds: countless different kinds of use of what we calls “symbols”, “words”, “sentences”. And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all, but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten.

Wittgenstein is very clear: it is misguided and perhaps even dangerous to deny the pragmatic and holistic character of sense. However, does this idea of sense as pragmatic and holistic include the idea that only sense itself is able to determine its use and limits? Must we therefore conclude that for Wittgenstein, sense is self-regulating, or hemeneutic? It is true that he says the uses of sense are “countless”, and that these uses are not derived from some logical rule. Nevertheless,

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must we conclude that sense alone draws its limits? For instance, §69 suggests that «We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn.» But does this quotation imply that only use is able to fix a limit? This notion of «limit» must be looked at more closely.

So, while the thesis of a strong continuity between Frege and Wittgenstein seems essentially correct, it also seems that it engenders a misreading, one that helps to explain the temptation of a hermeneutic reading of Wittgenstein. Moreover, while it seems right to say that the “context principle” remains in effect throughout Wittgenstein’s work, at least from the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* to the *Philosophical Investigations*, I think this statement obscures the fact that the operative notion of “context” is not the same as in earlier works, and that the *Philosophical Investigation*’s notion of “context” differs significantly from the holistic one found in Frege’s “context principle”. Along these lines, I would like to make a few terminological remarks. In Frege’s preface, the German term translated into English as “context” is *Zusammenhänge*. In fact, this German term means something more like “circumstances” or even better, “connections”. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, however, the terms used are more various, and markedly more pragmatic in their connotations, than *Zusammenhänge*. For example, Wittgenstein uses the terms *Umstände* (which is much closer in meaning to the English “circumstances” than *Zusammenhänge*), *Umgebung* (“environment”), or *Situation* (“situation”). These terms suggest a much more pragmatic conception of context; it is clear that what is being referred to is no longer the relatively more narrow, holistic and semantic conception found in the preface of the *Foundations of Arithmetic*.

The *Philosophical Investigations* introduces a very different notion of context: a pragmatic context that is determined by our preceding uses, but which in turn also redefines these uses. And only this latter, pragmatic type of context, one irreducible to the former, affords us an understanding of why Wittgensteinian sense is not a hermeneutic one, which I now hope to show in greater detail.

So, Diamond may insist a bit too resolutely on the strict continuity between Frege and Wittgenstein. Moreover, I think her insistence on a strong continuity between the early and the later Wittgenstein is also a bit misleading. Of course, there is such a continuity in the work of Wittgenstein. And the demonstration of this continuity is very relevant and very important. Nonetheless, the discrepancies between the “two” Wittgensteins are at least as important. It is perhaps correct to say that sense is self-determining and unlimited in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Indeed, the very famous §6.54 may stipulate that there is no positive nonsense in the *Tractatus* and that nonsense is only a methodological notion:

6.54: My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me

[23] In fact, we can also find an idea of a pragmatic context even in Frege: in his «Sinn und Bedeutung»’s paper but also in his text «Der Gedanke» (1918) but not in the famous preface.
eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb out through them, on them, over them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)

Looking at this paragraph, it would appear that Wittgenstein is saying that there is no natural limit to sense. It is not my point here to argue against that interpretation. Still, I think that is it highly problematic to apply the same interpretation to the *Philosophical Investigations*. If, as I have suggested the operative notion of context in the *Investigations* is not a merely holistic one, there is indeed an important difference between early and late Wittgenstein. I hope to show that Wittgenstein’s pragmatic context is not only an organizing principle that works in an exclusively internal way. I think we can understand this context as a way to explain and to limit sense and that this notion is less an internal than a real one.

e. From sense’s interpretation to its explanation

Charles Travis, in *Liasons Ordinaires*24 (a work which first appeared in French in 2005, a similar work has subsequently appeared in English in 2006 under the title *Thought’s Footing*25) forcefully demonstrates the impossibility of a hermeneutic approach to sense. My own argument here has clear debts to Travis. According to Travis, while there is of course for Wittgenstein no such thing as *apriori* reason – Dummett is again here the clear target - it is nonetheless possible to talk about limitations on, and explanation of, sense and nonsense in Wittgenstein.

Let’s take a look at Travis’ argument developed in chapter 4 of *Thought’s Footing*, entitled “Determination”. His argument is especially relevant to our purposes, since he cites many of the same sections as Diamond in “Realism and the Realistic Spirit,” in particular those concerning rule-following. However, while Diamond focuses on the treatment of this topic in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Travis focuses on two sections in the *Philosophical Investigations* where rules and rule-following are taken up, first at §§84-87 where the notion of a “a signpost” first appears, and the second at §§138-201. Looking at §85:

§85: A rule stands there like a sign-post. - Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country? But where it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of its finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one? And if there were not a single sign post, but a chain of adjacent ones, or chalk marks on the ground – is there only one way of interpreting them? - So I may say, the sign-post does after all leave no room for doubt.

The metaphor of the “sign-post” clarifies the way context works. Without context, the

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“signpost” has no sense, and so is unable to determine sense a priori. Nothing is determined, in an a priori way, if the signpost indicates “the direction of its finger or (e.g.) the opposite one”. Without context, I don’t know if the sign-post is addressed to a pedestrian, a motorist, a dog, and so on. By contrast, taken in context, this sign-post is obviously determining. Moreover, if the sign-post appears in a recognizable context, this context can be used to explain the sign-post in an unambiguous way. If I understand the context – if, for example, I am aware that I am on a motorway, that I am in a car, that I just got my driving license - I then understand very clearly that this signpost concerns me and how I am supposed to take it. Wittgenstein says here: “So I may say, the sign-post does after all leave no room for doubt.” He then immediately qualifies his remark: “Or rather: it sometimes leaves room for doubt and sometimes not. And now this is no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one.” This qualification is very important. According to Wittgenstein, - and this is what the qualification brings out – there is a necessary condition for understanding a sign-post: its being anchored in a real context. It means that the sign-post is not merely a conventional sign. It is not from convention that we act. Moreover, it is not only a matter of ‘recognition’: of recognizing the convention and the relevant context. The role of context is more subtle. Only a “sensibility” (this idea comes from Travis) to the irreducible uniqueness of the context allows us to understand it. That is why “this is no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one.” And according to this first discussion of rules at §§ 84-87, we may conclude, with Travis, that, at least some of the time, sense is explainable in terms of context; sometimes at least, the rules are determining. The second discussion of rules in the Philosophical Investigations would seem to argue against such a conclusion, however. Indeed, some sections, in particular those similar to the ones cited by Diamond, seem to weaken the idea that the rules can be determining: for instance, at §185 Wittgenstein says: “Now we get to the pupil to continue a series (say +2) beyond 1000 – and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.” This example would appear to support a hermeneutic reading of Wittgenstein; it is therefore not surprising that Diamond chooses it. Indeed, the passage appears to suggest that there can be no rational regulation of our uses. It seems here that Wittgenstein suggests that only our uses can limit sense. Not even mathematical rules are susceptible to rational and external explanations.

This would appear to present a paradox or at least, an inconsistency. Looking at the first discussion, that of the signpost, we are inclined to conclude the rules can be wholly determined by context. Looking at the second, it would appear that the rules are never completely determining, even in the mathematical case. Travis’s comments aid in resolving this apparent inconsistency, however. In Travis’ view, the second discussion doesn’t contradict the first one. Wittgenstein introduces two different kinds of understanding. And only the first one – that is, the
understanding in context enables some explanation of sense. Travis distinguishes two different concepts: according to him, only the first rules enable some ‘explanations’ (the German term Erklärung appears in §87). The second one affords only some ‘interpretations’ (the German term Deutung appears, for instance, §198). Travis distinguishes between the notions of “explanation” and “interpretation”. According to Travis, “explanations” are the paradigms of “situated representations” and “interpretations” are paradigmatic of the “unsituated representations”. On Travis’s view, only “situated representations” are capable of explanation.

Before continuing my discussion of Travis, however, I would like to make a brief editorial remark. My quotations come from the original version of Thought's Footing, the version that was first published in France with the French title: Les liaisons ordinaires. And because Travis’ thought on these matters was rapidly evolving at this time, the book known as Thought's Footing is not a direct translation of Les liaisons ordinaires. So I had to translate my quotations from the Liaisons ordinaires into English myself:

« A situated representation achieves its representation in some particular circumstances; and how the representation represents the things can be partially due to circumstances. In the most general case, the representation is produced in particular circumstances, in particular occasion where the fact that the representation is produced takes part to the fact that it is such a representation. »

I didn’t find an equivalent quotation in Thought’s Footing. However, obviously, this idea of a “situated representation” is still present in Thought’s Footing. Clearly, these “representations” aren’t only anchored in “circumstances”. Travis’ thesis is much more radical. According to Travis, “how the representation represents the things can be partially due to circumstances”. This implies that how the representation represents and how the representation follows a certain rule is determined by the circumstances. Only the fact that the representation is situated, only the fact that the representation is anchored in a context, enables us to give an explanation of how to use and to understand the representation. Conversely, an ‘interpretation’ is a representation which lacks this situated character. However, the same representation, if situated, would be explainable in a rational way. For instance, the context understood, it would be possible to understand why the pupil continues the mathematical series in such and such a way (for example, because he confuses addition and multiplication, because he is mechanically repeating a series he learnt before, etc.). Only the situation explains.

Let me focus on two of Travis’ examples to show how his analysis differs from Diamond’s, in

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26 The original French version is « Une représentation située accomplit sa représentation dans des circonstances particulières ; et peut en partie devoir la façon dont elle représente les choses à ces circonstances. Dans le cas le plus central, elle est produite en des circonstances particulières, en une occasion particulière, où le fait qu'elle ait été produite fait partie du fait qu'elle est la représentation qu'elle est. » in Les liaisons ordinaires, translated by B. Ambroise.
particular, in Chapter 4 of the French version [for those of you familiar with the English version there are many similar examples in the English version: in the chapter 4, the examples of Pia’s shoes, of Sid, etc.]. I am here translating Travis’s examples: “Luc said that the pigs are eating slop”\(^{27}\) and “the pigs are gorging themselves in the tulips”\(^{28}\). Its worth remarking on the terminological and stylistic differences evident between Travis’s choice of examples and Diamond’s: the are no “prime numbers” here, a fact that is likely not fortuitious but which instead has a function both rhetorical and conceptual. The fact that Travis’ examples are earthy and perhaps a little disgusting is meant to remind us that the relevant notion of context is a real one, not merely a holistic and formal context of organization. It is not an internal context, or an extension of our past uses. His context is a real one. Here is the “bedrock” that “turns one’s spade”.

Moreover, those examples support the previously outlined thesis: according to Travis, as long as they are not situated, there are many possible understandings of the expressions, “Luc said that the pigs are eating slop” and “The pigs are gorging themselves in the tulips”. There are many conceivable aesthetic, naturalist, biologic understandings of these expressions. When the expression appears in an actual situation, when it takes place in a particular context, the expression is determined and its sense can be explained. If a farm boy charged with looking after some pigs returns after a couple of hours drinking with his buddies exclaims: argh! “the pigs are gorging themselves in the tulips”, this declaration is obviously not an aesthetic one. According to this particular context, the sense of the expression can be explained. It means something like: “I didn’t keep watch over the pigs, they must have found a way to open the barn door, now I’m in deep trouble”. Here, the sense of the expression is not determined by the use of the farmer or by some convention: the young farmer would surely prefer another explanation be applicable his sentence. However, only the context (the fact that the pigs left and that he was supposed to be taking care of them) determines it.

With these comical and earthy examples, Travis introduces a very important conceptual critique. By sharply distinguishing between the notion of “explanation” and “interpretation”, and by reintroducing the idea of a real and pragmatic context, Travis weakens hermeneutic readings of Wittgenstein. In so doing he also provides us with the conceptual apparatus for a new way of thinking about the notion of “reason” in Wittgenstein: we can now try to understand what a rational foundation of the notion of sense might be like, according to Travis.

\(^{27}\) “Luc a dit que les cochons mangent de la pâtée”
\(^{28}\) “Les cochons se goinfrent dans les tulipes.”
f. A new conception of reason

Like Diamond and McDowell, Travis rejects the idea of *apriori* and categorical reason. Travis rejects it in the following terms: no *Umstand* (« circumstance ») is predetermined by a *Bedingung* (« condition »). That is precisely why, without a context, all interpretations are possible.

Nevertheless, when sense occurs in a context, the rules of sense become both necessary and objective. A new concept of “reason” is established. This notion of “reason” is neither an ideal nor even a conventional one. It cannot be understood as a self-determination arising out of our uses. On the contrary, Travis introduces a realistic and partially external concept of reason. Something is rational not only when we can use it. Something is rational when we can explain it, in an unambiguous way, to the context.

Here is a new “context principle” that is rational. And a principle is rational only if it is objective and necessary. Such a principle can explain and not only interpret the sense. This principle can distinguish among many possible understandings which is the relevant one. According to this principle, “understanding” is no longer a relative but a rational notion. In fact, without any ambiguity and without any conventions, I understand the sense of “the pigs are gorging themselves in the tulips”. There would be a rational foundation of the sense.

Similarly, the notion of nonsense is also radically transformed in Travis. On his reading, whether or not something is “nonsense” does not depend only on the way we use the sentence in which the term appears. For Travis, “Caesar is a prime number” can, without any ambiguity be true or false: it can have a sense or it can be an instance of positive nonsense. I think that with the introduction of a “reason principle”, Travis understands that there is the logical possibility of error and mistake (and not merely a “fantasy”\(^29\)). If sense can be explained, then nonsense can be explained too: not by a categorical logic, but by the context. When the farmer say “ the pigs are gorging themselves in the tulips”, if I understand that this farmer is just a poet who loves observing pigs, I just make a mistake. I just don’t understand what happens. What I understand is not relatively, but absolutely, wrong. It is positive nonsense.

I think this introduction of the category of “errors” is a very important one. With the introduction of the ideas that sense can be explainable (and not only interpretable), and that context is not only a holistic and formal principle but also a real one, Travis is able to understand that there are foundations of sense as well as of error. On my view, this clears the way for a conception of reason that is neither relativist nor idealist.

\(^{29}\) Cf. Diamond’s distinction in « Realism and the Realistic Spirit »: « The difference hinges on the distinction between *mistake* and *fantasy*. » op.cit., p.45. According to Travis, «mistakes» are also possible in Wittgenstein.
Conclusion

Travis’s reading is both innovative and compelling. Only a radical contextualism is able to reflect the importance of the influence of the real on our practices. With the introduction of a rational principle, Travis suggests that the real contexts cannot be entirely reduced to our uses. This is not to say that we have to draw a sharp line between the notions of “context” and of “use”. On the contrary, we could say that it is the resolute readings of Wittgenstein, and their focus on the importance of use, that lead to an overlooking of the fundamental importance of pragmatic (and not only holistic) context. Thanks to Travis’ reading, it is possible to deal with the surprises and the disappointments of a reality that is much more complex than the one we think we control. Nevertheless, while Travis’ reading is attractive in many respects, it remains to be seen whether it is in fact more in the spirit of Wittgenstein than the resolute ones, which are remarkable for their subtlety and erudition. Moreover, Wittgenstein’s work is complex enough to allow many interpretations. I would like to conclude with some remarks about this.

I concede that some paragraphs of the Philosophical Investigations do suggest the possibility of a hermeneutic reading of Wittgenstein. For instance, the sections following §475, which appear aimed at clarifying the notion of “reason” are somewhat obscure. §478, for example, seems to suggest the possibility of a hermeneutic reading of the notion of sense, at least the idea that the sense is self-determining. In §478, it would appear that the reason is not an external principle:

§478: What kind of reason have I to suggest that my finger will feel a resistance when it touches the table? What kind of reason to believe that it will hurt if this pencil pierces my hand? When I ask this, a hundred reasons present themselves, each drowning the voice of the others. “But I have experienced it myself innumerable times, and as often heard of similar experiences; if it were not so, it would… etc.”

§478, seems to suggest that there is no possible explanation of what I believe or of what I understand. Similarly, §§480 and 483 do suggest the same idea:

§480: This on could in fact take “ground” for an opinion to mean only what a man had said to himself before he arrived at the opinion. The calculation that he has actually carried out.
§483: A good ground is one that looks like this.

Those paragraphs would appear to go against my earlier contextualist reading. Maybe we can find some explanation for this in the fact that there are several different voices to be found in the Philosophical Investigations, and that the voices in the sections 475 et passim have a conditional and interrogative character.

Nonetheless, it remains undeniable that pragmatic context plays a fundamental role in the Philosophical Investigations. And from my point of view, it is relevant to consider such a context as an explanatory principle. I think the context, once recognized as such, is a rational principle that can explain sense in a non-relative way. This context provides the conditions for comprehension.
If we are mistaken about these conditions, we fail to understand the sense. This implies that nonsense can be explained too. §412 seems very clear in this regard:

§412: But I did not utter the sentence in the surroundings (Umgebung) in which it would have had an everyday and unparadoxical sense.

Here, it seems that the “context”, or at least the “surroundings” forms the foundation for sense or nonsense. It can act as an explanation. §32 also supports this reading:

§32: He will often have to guess the meaning of these definitions; and will guess sometimes right, sometimes wrong.

Context seems to be the only way to explain the sense rationally. Only a “sensibility,” to this non-conventional context is capable of providing a necessary and objective foundation for sense.

Charlotte Gauvry
Université Paris 1, Panthéon-Sorbonne
Visiting Graduate Student, The University of Chicago