

Between Sense and Nonsense

Benoist on a realistic account of intentionality

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[forthcoming, *Philosophiques*, 2010 (in French translation)]

In *Sens et sensibilité* (Paris: Cerf, 2009), Benoist aims to expand and enhance the proposal for a ‘realistic’ account of intentionality and sense that he presented in his previous book, *Les limites de l’intentionnalité* (Paris: Vrin, 2005; ‘LI’). I begin in §1 by highlighting what I take to be one of the most important lines of thought in Benoist’s account, before raising a few questions in §2 about its consequences.

§1. De-mythologizing and re-contextualizing intentionality

Benoist intends for his account of intentionality and sense to be ‘realistic’ in the sense of being sensitive to the real-life trials and travails that we face when we try to make sense of things, when we try to make sense of one another, and when we try to make sense of ourselves and what we do. Benoist’s realism is meant to contrast with what he calls a ‘mythological’ conception of intentionality (6), according to which things belonging to its order – primarily intentions to do and to say things, along with the purposes and senses intended to be expressed by the relevant acts – have a kind of ‘autonomy’, are such as to constitute an ‘empire within an empire’, and ultimately have a priority to, and are self-sufficient to fix, reference (Fregean *Bedeutung*) in both its theoretical and practical guises (cf., Ch XII; cf. as well LI 8-11). Benoist argues that any plausible (i.e., *non-mythological*) account of intentionality must instead be ‘sensitive’ to the genuine ‘fragility’ that is ‘intrinsic’ to our mental and linguistic activity (197), by

which Benoist means the fact that we have no guarantee that we will succeed in making sense on any of these fronts. For Benoist, any account of sense that fails to incorporate this fact inevitably tilts toward a form of idealism, insofar as it lacks a genuine ‘sensitivity’ to the real world of intentionality (314; cf., 101), to the real world of our ‘finite’ and ‘fallible’ attempts at sense-making (256), a world in which success in making sense is a deeply ‘contingent’ affair (228).

Benoist therefore champions a picture in which the ‘order’ of intentionality itself is beset by a ‘porosity’ (158), due to its transpiring in a reality which, though in itself ‘indifferent’ to this order, is nevertheless thoroughly determinative of it (166). In real life, we are surprised or shocked by discoveries, by novelty (cf., 316) – and not just because we learn that something we believe to be true is in fact false (or vice versa), but because we come across something (whether in perception or conversation) about which we genuinely don’t know what to believe, because we don’t even know *what to say*. In his previous book Benoist furnishes J.L. Austin’s way of making this point as one of his own primary examples: ‘if we’re sure it’s a goldfinch, and a real goldfinch, and then in the future it does something outrageous (explodes, quotes Mrs. Woolf, or what not) we don’t say we were wrong to say it was a goldfinch, *we don’t know what to say*’.¹ In the present work, Benoist returns to this point by reflection on Cormac McCarthy’s recent novel, *No Country for Old Men*, and its subsequent cinematic adaptation by the Coen brothers: we would find ourselves at a loss for words were we ourselves to be confronted with someone like ‘the absolutely crazy assassin of the novel’ – and yet (of course) this wouldn’t make the assassin any less *real*, or disappear like a ghost (319n1).

At the core of Benoist's project, then, is the firm belief that, in reality, *not everything makes sense*, that there is genuine, recalcitrant nonsense in our experience. To be sure, Benoist does not mean to claim that *nothing* makes sense, that *everything* is nonsense, on a 'global' level. Rather, Benoist simply wants to insist on the reality of nonsense on a 'local' level, within a given context (SS, 317). What is more, Benoist admits that there is always *some* sense to be made even at the local level. Benoist's main point is simply that there is always *more* in what we experience of reality than we can make sense of.²

In this Benoist echoes central claims made by Merleau-Ponty in *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) – something in itself unsurprising, as Benoist openly acknowledges his debt to Merleau-Ponty in the 'Foreword' (cf., 10-11). In what he calls 'intellectualism', Merleau-Ponty criticizes a position quite close to what Benoist calls 'idealism', precisely on the grounds that 'it is itself incapable of taking account of the variety of our experience, of that in it which is *nonsense*, of the *contingency* of contents' (*Phénoménologie*, 172; my ital.). Nevertheless, like Benoist, Merleau-Ponty insists at the same time that, though 'one cannot say that *everything has a sense*', one should also not say 'that *everything is nonsense*'; instead, one can say 'only that *there is sense*' – and by implication, that there is *some* nonsense in our experience as well (*Phénoménologie*, 342).

In joining Merleau-Ponty in rejecting intellectualist idealism of this sort, Benoist rejects as well the neo-Hegelian picture put forward by John McDowell (among others) according to which the world itself is enclosed within the realm of sense, or as McDowell would put it, within the realm of the conceptual and the thinkable (cf., 10).³ For his part,

Benoist ‘does not believe that everything in the world is ‘objective spirit’’ (10), because ‘reality does not reduce itself to its ‘notion’’ (277). Yet the mistaken assumption that Benoist sees at work here is one that he thinks is actually shared, not just by the neo-Hegelians, but also by Frege and the early Husserl (as he makes especially clear in his previous book; cf., LI, Ch XII), as well as by ‘hermeneutical’ theorists inspired by the later Wittgenstein (220f). For Benoist, all of these thinkers are committed to the ‘the autonomy of sense’ (314), to the belief that there is a kind of ‘completeness’ within the realm of sense (122) – in McDowell’s words, a belief in ‘the unboundedness of the conceptual’ (cf., *Mind and World*, Lecture II).

Against this, Benoist insists that we must face up to the fact that our capacity for making sense of things is simply not capable of fully ‘measure’ the real (319). Instead, Benoist sides with the more radical empiricism of the pragmatists – represented here by William James (Ch IV), C.I. Lewis (Ch V), and Hilary Putnam (Ch X). For Benoist, the genuine insight of this empiricism is epitomized in their insistence that, because experience itself continues to unfold in unanticipated – and (crucially) ‘unable to be anticipated’ –ways (cf., 140-146), what we can mean by our words, what we can intend to do with them (indeed, intend to do *in general*), is also something that continues to unfold and expand, depending on what, in fact, we turn out to become acquainted with. As Benoist puts the point in his previous work, the ‘‘intending’ that we are capable of is severely limited by the field of objects with which we are engaged’ (LI, 259).⁴

Yet, for Benoist, what ‘the wait’ inherent in our experience ‘teaches us’ involves more than becoming acquainted with new members of the extensions of our same old concepts (147). Experience itself is an ‘apprenticeship’ in the deeper sense of being a

process of acquiring new concepts altogether, new ways of relating to new objects. Benoist thus also shares the pragmatists' empiricist intuition that it is simply *not possible* to envisage all the things that one could mean or intend. This is not, of course, because it is impossible to think *of* every object prior to encountering it; this *is* possible, or at least seems to be, assuming 'everything' itself has a sense. Rather, this is because it is not possible to think of each individual thing in the completely determinate *way* in which it will be experienced in such and such moment of world-history. *This* – the absolutely singular experiencing, along with what is experienced therein – this will be 'always new' (121), such that experience truly always 'makes a difference', in this deeper sense, *within* the realm of sense itself (151; cf., 140f, 147f, and 278). For Benoist, experience 'cannot leave sense intact: it enriches and modifies it' (146); for this reason, he concludes, we should embrace a form of 'Putnamian externalism' (6; cf., LI, Ch XIII).

Yet to be *truly* realistic, true to the reality of our (human) order of intentionality, Benoist thinks that we must incorporate more from the realm of *pragmatics* than the classical pragmatists typically surmised. More specifically, Benoist argues that we must supplement their semantical externalism with an insistence on the role that the pragmatic *context* of mental and linguistic acts plays in fixing what is meant or intended, even in cases where (ostensibly) nothing dramatically new or extraordinary is being meant or said, or nothing new is being discovered or experienced. Here Benoist urges that we follow J.L. Austin and especially Charles Travis, in essentially embracing and generalizing the later Wittgenstein's intuition (in *On Certainty*) that it is not only true that 'there is no statement that is paradoxical and apparently 'devoid of sense' to which we cannot give a sense, by means of a complication of the scenario, a modification of

context' (230), but that it is also true that there are contexts or situations in which otherwise perfectly intelligible statements actually make no sense at all, cases in which 'what is real rejects my affirmation as an affirmation that is empty of even the slightest value', such that 'it is purely and simply out of place', 'inept', to use Austin's words (306).

For this reason, Benoist takes the central notion for a realistic theory of intentionality to be one developed by Travis – namely, that of the sort of '*understanding* (entente)' of an actual statement that can be achieved only *given* the completely determinate, 'real' context inhabited by those actually making use of the statement (cf., 300f). Benoist thinks that an appeal to an understanding of what is said is absolutely ineliminable because only 'reasoning in terms of understandings' is capable of 'taking the measure of the constant adaptation of discourse to reality', and so 'allows, to the extent that this is possible, the adaptation of the use of expressions to different contexts' (301). But then because of the possibility in which 'the deviant circumstance arises' and hence 'the semantical performance that was brought about therefore loses its significance, purely and simply', Benoist thinks we must conclude that 'sense is 'relative to a context'' (230) – not just the relative to context of reference provided by those 'objects with which we are engaged' (as with the empiricists), but relative also to the particular pragmatic context of the linguistic acts (statements) themselves (as with the 'Travisian contextualism').⁵

§2. Contexts for logic and philosophy as well?

Let me now raise two questions concerning the consequences of the externalist-cum-contextualist account of sense that Benoist has proposed. The first has to do with

the status of logic in Benoist's account, the second has to do with the status of Benoist's own discourse, and in particular, with the applicability of Benoist's account of sense to the sense of his own claims.

Reflection on the sense of logical expressions was, after all, what provided the primary motivation for the postulation of the autonomy of sense in the first place, at least in the case of Benoist's most frequently consulted autonomy-of-sense theorists, Husserl and Frege (though it surely provides a primary motivation for Kant's and Bolzano's different forms of idealism as well). Each of these philosophers is drawn to the thought that logic is distinguished precisely by the fact that it enjoys the kind of indifference to reality that Benoist wishes to deny is possible. They are drawn, moreover, to a picture of logic according to which its laws actually govern, not just the realm of sense but that of reality as well, insofar as logical (logico-grammatical) well-formedness represents a *conditio sine qua non* on the possibility that an expression could 'express' any concrete, material sense, and insofar as logical possibility (and impossibility) represents a similar *conditio* on the real (im)possibility of objects themselves – but not vice versa. Indeed, it is exactly this absolute autonomy of logic that is thought to underwrite its long-standing claim to provide cognition that is both universally and necessarily objectively valid, and is known to be so *a priori*.

Now, since Benoist has given up on the possibility of the autonomy of sense *überhaupt*, it follows that even the senses of purely logical expressions (constants), along with the thoughts expressed by purely logical statements (laws), will be subject to the same indeterminacy of sense *per se*, absent their being associated with a particular stretch of experience and a particular context of being expressed in a real act of assertion. But

then, for Benoist, logic ‘in itself’, therefore, does not ‘say’ anything on its own; rather, only actual logicians – in lectures, conversations, textbooks, and so on – say things, perhaps on logic’s behalf. What is more, it follows from Benoist’s account that there are only certain contexts in which the stating of a logical law would ‘make sense’ or be appropriate; it would not make sense, say, during a wedding ceremony (after the question: ‘do you take this woman to be your wife?’).

Yet even if this much is true (as it surely seems to be), what is less clear, on Benoist’s account, is what it is, exactly, that logicians actually say, when what they say *does* succeed in making sense. Furthermore, it is not clear whether what they say in such contexts (whatever this is) is something that is rightly thought of as contributing to an *a priori* discipline. Benoist himself recognizes that the contingency and contextuality that he wants to insist is inherent in and intrinsic to ‘the order of intentionality’ might very well ‘seem to abolish logic’, as Wittgenstein puts it in *Logical Investigations* §242. For his part, Wittgenstein goes on to claim: ‘but this does not abolish logic at all’; in his previous book, Benoist cites this very passage with approval (cf., LI, 10n2), implying that he, too, does not think that the very idea of logic is abolished if we take seriously his proposed ‘recontextualization of intentionality so as to render it a real act and no longer merely an idea’ (LI 10). It remains to be seen, however, what a positive account of logic – logical constants, logical form, logical law – would actually look like within the context of Benoist’s contextual realism.⁶

Now, the worry about the status of logicians’ statements is one that readily generalizes to mathematics and to any other ostensibly ‘pure’ discipline – including philosophy itself. This leads me to a second, and perhaps even more pressing, issue –

namely, the sense of the theoretical terms made use of in Benoist's own presentation of his contextual realism (terms like that of 'context', 'circumstance', 'situation', 'reality', 'sense', 'understanding (entente)', and so on) and the correlative status of the statements Benoist himself makes using these terms. It would seem that Benoist must take at least *these* 'meta'-concepts to enjoy an *a priori* validity with respect to the order of intentionality – and so ultimately a kind of autonomy with respect to (future) reality itself. Otherwise Benoist would have no grounds upon which to make the modally inflected theoretical claims that he does make throughout his book, claims such as: it is genuinely '*impossible* to conceive of an understanding that would be all-purpose' (301; my ital.); or: 'there is in *every* use' of an expression 'an understanding that excludes some others, but which at the same time is *always* situated as well in a relation to an open possibility of others still', an '*constitutive* openness to other uses' (302; my ital.). But what else could license such claims, if not something akin to a Husserlian eidetic intuition, an apprehension of a certain *essence* of what, e.g., an understanding itself is, and what, therefore, 'understanding' means in this (philosophical) context?⁷

Were Benoist to admit such an essence, however – let alone the *experience* of such an essence – this would seem to show that Benoist, too, ultimately accepts that *there is* something prior to, and determinative of, all possible understandings and contexts – in effect, conditions for the possibility of reality as such, and of the reality of the order of intentionality as well – *and* that one can make perfectly meaningful claims about these essences, and so can meaningfully anticipate at least these features of reality in general and intentionality in particular. But if so, then the reflexive application of Benoist's theory to itself would threaten to push the whole position toward an incoherence of the

sort that Husserl found to afflict a different, though equally radical, empiricist theory of meaning in his *Prolegomena to the Logische Untersuchungen* – namely, one according to which the theory propounded cancels itself by denying the very conditions that it presupposes for its own validity.⁸

Benoist could claim, of course, that, as with logic (indeed, as with all assertions), not all contexts are appropriate for making philosophical assertions of the sort that he does in his book. On *this* point, however, the classical autonomy-of-sense theorists – especially Husserl – would surely agree. In fact, it is one of the familiar theses of Husserlian phenomenology that genuine philosophical assertions are possible only in quite extraordinary ‘non-natural’ contexts (only after effecting a total transformation in one’s *Einstellung*). Yet this would not change the fact, for both Benoist as for Husserl (and the others), that what is being said in such special contexts nevertheless purports to be *about* all possible sense-making, *a priori*, that such statements would seem to require something like a *Wesensschau* for their (epistemic) ground – in short, that such statements appear to contravene the limits set by a radically empiricistic approach to sense and intentionality.

Both of these questions are as much a request for Benoist to say more than he has, to extend his account even further, as they are a criticism of his position as it now stands. And in any case, what Benoist has already said, both in this book and in the rest of his extraordinarily rich and incisive writings, will – or should – surely ‘make a difference’, and a considerable one, within contemporary philosophy of mind and language.

Notes

¹ *Écrits philosophiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 60; Benoist cites this passage at LI, 269.

² This core commitment is emphasized in the concluding sentence of Benoist's previous book and reprised in the penultimate sentence of this one as well: 'There are significantly more things in your acts (because they are of the world) than are in your philosophy' (LI 283); 'There are significantly more things in the world than in our philosophies' (319).

³ With this Benoist also rejects the 'austere conception of nonsense' recently proposed by neo-Wittgensteinians like Cora Diamond and James Conant, according to which there is no such thing as substantial nonsense, but always and only cases where we are taken in by expressions or incidents which give off the *illusion* of making sense, yet which ultimately present us, not only with no sense, but with nothing 'substantial' at all. Against this, Benoist reminds us that 'there are any number of forms of nonsense' (224n2; cf., 309 and 316). (In light of the Austin quote above and the example of the murderer, we might say that Benoist's acceptance of 'substantial' nonsense is at once an insistence on the reality of the *monstruous*.)

⁴ Here it is useful to compare Benoist's discussion in LI of his first encounter with North American squirrels, and the related 'Putnamian question' which arises concerning Benoist's previous, Europe-indexed, use of 'squirrel' (LI, 256f).

⁵ Benoist's example is again from *No Country for Old Men*: 'a character asks the assassin if the regular tenant of the room *is there*', when 'the body of the victim lies in repose on the armchair to his side' (299-300; my ital.). Benoist takes the response of the assassin to have 'considerable analytical precision': '*not in the sense that you mean*' (300).

⁶ Travis has taken up this issue in his essay 'What do the laws of logic say?', in *Hilary Putnam*, eds., Conant and Zeglen (Routledge, 2002).

⁷ An even more straightforward question of the same sort arises with respect to Benoist's claim that 'in what is real, *by definition*, anything can happen' (165; my ital.).

⁸ Compare *Prolegomena*, Appendix to §26 as well as §32 et seq.; cf., in addition, *Ideen I*, §18 et seq. One thinks here as well of Merleau-Ponty's highly suggestive claim in *Phénoménologie de la perception* that in perception we are in fact confronted with 'a consciousness of a *lived logic* that cannot provide an account of itself', a 'phenomenon' that Merleau-Ponty happily admits is 'unacceptable to thinking in objective terms', but which he insists is *real* nevertheless (61).