

# **CAN WE THINK NONSENSE?**

**OUDCE Philosophical Society**

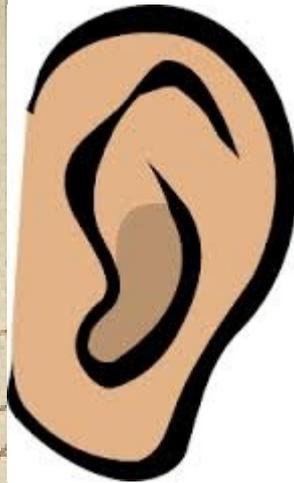
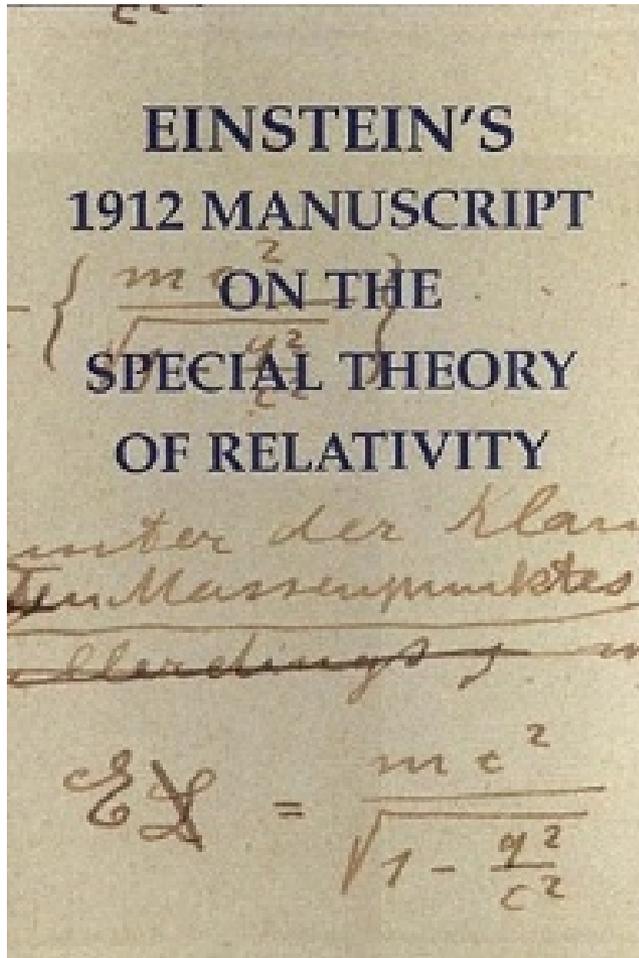
**2014 Members' Day**

**«The Nature of Thought»**

**by**

**Christian Michel**

The theory of relativity listens to a breakfast...



# CATEGORY MISTAKES

*Cesar is a prime number.*

*The theory of relativity is listening*

*to a breakfast.*

*Colorless blue dreams sleep furiously.*



GRAMMATICALLY CORRECT

ALL WORDS MEANINGFUL

BUT:

A MISMATCH OF CONCEPTS !!

?

False propositions

contentful thought but  
false (and absurd)

No proposition at all

no thought content

**The view I want to defend today**

## WHY DOES IT MATTER ?

G. Ryle:



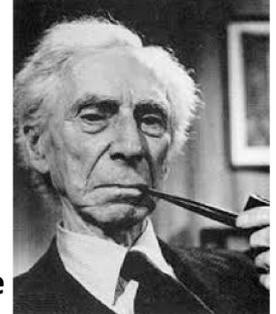
Certain philosophical questions and answers are category mistakes

*Philosophy = from **category practise** to **category discipline**.*

Example:

- Mental causation

B. Russell:



Logical paradoxes due mistakes

Examples:

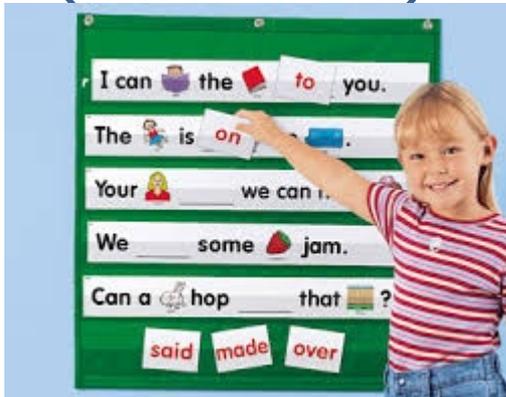
- Set of all sets
- Liar paradox

this statement is false.

# FROM (LINGUISTIC) MEANING TO THOUGHT CONTENT

“Meaning”

Sentence



“Content”

Thought/  
proposition



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PROPOSITION =

- sharable content of thought
- truth evaluable
- can be embedded in a that-clause

## CLAIM TO DEFEND:

**Category mistakes - Meaning: yes / Content: no**

-> accomodates the intuition that category mistakes are better than:

**“Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe”  
(*Jabberwocky*, L.Carroll)**

**“bus go today l”**

**“Grumbleditshtusmillofu”**

## Argument from propositional attitude ascriptions (1)

(see O. Magidor, 2013)

*Sentences with embedded category mistakes are meaningful.*

→ *Hence category mistakes are meaningful.*

(A) *Peter said that the number two is green.*

(B) *Jane believes that the number two is green.*

## Argument from propositional attitude ascriptions (2)

*(A) Peter said that the number two is green.*

Reply:

The opponent can argue: (A) is not worse or better than “Peter said that Bob is grympolistic”

“The number two is green” is mentioned/quoted but not used, or used merely deferentially

## Argument from propositional attitude ascriptions (3)

(see O. Magidor, 2013)

***(B) Jane believes that the number two is green.***

**Reply:**

**A competent speaker can't really believe that the number two is green.**

**Response (Magidor):**

**Example: Jane = mathematical philosopher**

- **The “number two” is the set of all pairs of things**
- **The number two is “green” if most pairs of things are green**

**Jane certainly is competent in using the words «number two» and «green»**

**Reply:**

**On the conventional meaning the sentence is meaningless. Jane just changed the meanings.**

# ARGUMENT FROM METAPHOR (1)

(see O. Magidor, 2013)

(A) Juliet is the sun.

(B) Stalin is the sun.

(C) The poem is pregnant.

## Argument:

*1. Metaphors are category mistakes.*

*2. Metaphors are meaningful.*

*3. Metaphors are meaningful not through some different «metaphorical meaning», but their unique literal meaning.*

*-> Hence some category mistakes are meaningful.*

## ARGUMENT FROM METAPHOR (2)

### Reply:

Granting that the literal meaning is at work (hence the metaphor is literally meaningful), one can still insist that category mistakes are *contentless*.

Meaning can be unique and the ambiguity can be on the level of content.

This avoids the (possible) concern that massive ambiguity of meaning dissolves the identity of word/sentence...

...and accounts for the double intuition that metaphors are both “odd” (literally nonsense?) and meaningful (“metaphorically”).

## CONCLUSIONS

Who could doubt that more complex category mistakes are contentless nonsense?

*“The orbited candle would have been imposing a sharpened carpet’s fourteenth copper gesture, but insignificance elects the first folder time.” (from E. Camp)*

The proposed view allows us to provide answers to a broader spectrum of problems

**We (probably) can’t think category mistakes as thoughts with propositional content.**