

Research Note

The Triplex Entity: An Investigation Into Meaningless Nonsense¹

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ABSTRACT

This research note intends, first, to provide a clear exposition of “meaningless nonsense”, a philosophical concept propounded by Japanese philosopher Masaya Chiba, and, second, to indicate its potential to broaden and deepen one’s perspective. To achieve the aims, the discussion is conducted in the following order: after an introduction which succinctly reviews previous studies of Chiba’s thought, the first part elucidates the precise context in which “meaningless nonsense” was invented, and clarifies that the neologism, as an uncountable, stands for being unambiguously noninterpretable and, as a countable, means an object as that which exists in such a state; thereupon, the second part presents a hypothesis that one could innovate one’s worldview by regarding everything as a “meaningless nonsense” because it enables one to deem an object as a triplex entity—as a finitely significant being, as a potentially infinitely polysemic existence, and as an unambiguously noninterpretable body.

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Introduction: Backdrop, Scope, and Purposes of This Essay

Insofar as one can conjecture from existing publications that handle today’s philosophy and its trends, it would never be regarded as inaccurate to say that Europeans and Americans are at the head of the field. Though some may name Yuk Hui, Kojin Karatani, or Elie During as an exception, almost all of the globally influential thinkers who are active today (e.g. Noam Chomsky, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, and Markus Gabriel) have their roots in either of the two continents. Compared to the authoritative figures whose reputation is worldwide, Masaya Chiba, a contemporary philosopher of Japan, commands far less recognition internationally. Still, if those who are trained in philosophical thinking peruse his texts with condign attention, many of them will realize that most of his discourses are constructed with rigorous logic and analytic precision and contain a goodly number of nonpareil insights. For instance, scholars interested in post-structuralism will discover many unorthodox but well-thought-out construals of Gilles Deleuze’s texts in his maiden book which cogently revealed that anti-relational elements played momentous roles in the French thinker’s thought (Chiba, 2013).

As is befitting to a philosopher who has modeled himself on Deleuze, who, together with Felix Guattari, observed that the mission of philosophy should be the “continuous creation of concepts” (1994, p. 8), the most idiosyncratic excellence of the young Japanese philosopher lies in his singular ingenuity to formulate a novel concept that one can employ as a lens through which to contemplate the world and its existences in a fresh manner. In fact, he once articulated his obvious approval to that idea, maintaining that a philosopher should be “an artisan in creating concepts” (Chiba, 2016, para. 1). Along with “meaningless nonsense”, which will be investigated in this essay, “the un-uncanny”, “para-mound”, and “the non-interpretive” could be counted as representative of the thought-provoking and insightful concepts Chiba has ever devised. But, as I intimated, little attention has hitherto been paid to his thought.

Of course, it is by no means the case that there has been no scholarly essay which referred to Chiba’s philosophy: in addition to a few reviews of the abovementioned volume (Higaki, 2014;

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Egawa, 2015), a scholar who majors in literary studies quoted Chiba's examination into the current post-truth situation to reinforce his intriguing hypothesis that both the creation and interpretation of literary texts are suffering from "the exhaustion of consciousness" (Yagura, 2020, p. 114), and another academic conducted a close investigation into "the non-interpretive" and its applicability (Mikado, 2020). Yet, there is no doubt that still much work has to be carried out in order to adequately illuminate originality and profundities of his thought. In substance, this research note is an attempt to rectify the state.

Naturally, it is on no account possible for one paper to comprehensively clarify the overall structure of his philosophy²; therefore, this note concentrates on the twofold task of, first, anatomizing the abovementioned concept "meaningless nonsense", which Chiba brought forth in a monograph titled "Meaningless Nonsense" that is included in his 2018 book *Meaningless Nonsense* and, second, of indicating its potential to deepen and broaden one's perspective in a way that no other ideas can do. To carry out the task, the argumentation goes as follows: the next part elucidates the precise context in which the neologism was invented, and clarifies that it, as an uncountable, stands for being unambiguously noninterpretable and, as a countable, means an object as that which exists in such a state; the second part presents my hypothesis that one could innovate one's worldview by regarding everything as a "nonsense without sense" because it enables one to deem an object as a triplex entity—as a finitely significant being, as a potentially infinitely polysemic existence, and as an unambiguously noninterpretable body.

The Contextual Background and the Import of "Meaningless Nonsense"

Not a few of those who see or hear the phrase "meaningless nonsense" for the first time would feel like putting it down as a verbose expression, and some of them might even dismiss it as an illogical pun. Actually, in the introductory part of the essay wherein the concept was presented, the coiner himself frankly acknowledged the wording to be "a tautology" (Chiba, 2018, p. 10). Still, one ought to bethink oneself that though other philosophical neologisms such as Foucault's "historical a priori", Derrida's "deconstruction", and Agamben's "bare life" would have struck many people as clumsy or oblique on first hearing, they have become familiar terms not only for professional scholars but also for public intellectuals. Like them, once the meaning has been sufficiently made clear, most people will appreciate that "meaningless nonsense" is denominated with remarkable dexterity and acumen.

Then, as I preannounced in the preceding part, let us look into the context around the formulation of the concept and its import. Aside from the introductory passage, the very disquisition "Meaningless Nonsense" is made up of seven numbered sections, and we ought to note that the concept was brought forward together with another one dubbed "*meaningful nonsense*". Moreover, the bulk of the opening three sections is allotted to an explanation for the latter (see Chiba, 2018, pp. 10-21). This implies that a proper understanding of "*meaningful nonsense*" is crucial, or rather indispensable for one to grasp "meaningless nonsense" accurately; to put it differently, Chiba probably believed that the two notions ought to be introduced as a set. Allowing for these circumstances, we had better check out the sections explaining the purport of "*meaningful nonsense*" before examining "meaningless nonsense".

Notwithstanding its superficial ambiguity, the signification of the strange-sounding notion will not impress one as hard to take in, for it denotes an idea which an ordinarily commonsensical person in our age will accept as a plain fact. In the initial sentences of the essay, Chiba (2018) supplied a crisp definition for it by taking a familiar thing as a concrete instance:

Imagine that there is a tomato before us. We cannot completely comprehend what it is or what its *meanings* are. As to anything, it is impossible for one to exhaust its meanings. Depending on the perspective, meanings of an object are variedly, infinitely created.... The tomato before us manifests itself [to us] as a thing which has a "finite number of meanings"; yet, it is...what is "infinitely polysemic" too.... *Nonsense as being infinitely polysemic—let us call this "meaningful nonsense". Every object is, in fact, a "meaningful nonsense".* (pp. 10-11; italics added).

Most people will agree to the pith of this passage: that perfect knowledge of a thing cannot be acquired because its potential qualities are incalculable. In reality, that sort of claim is a theoretical pillar of social constructionist theories which have sizably contributed to correcting social injustices during the last several decades. Essentially, "meaningful nonsense" was minted primarily to

emphasize the substantial inscrutability of things. Thence, we can presume that, as an uncountable noun, it means being boundlessly, i.e. *nonsensically* ambiguous, and, when used as a countable noun, it stands for an object as that which retains the unknowable depths whence an infinite number of meanings can potentially originate.

But, on the other hand, people will descry little novelty in the explanation, suspecting that the import of the neology is closely akin to that of diverse concepts which have been set forth by prominent thinkers of the past few centuries. That sentiment is surely correct. Only by idly skimming a history of modern philosophy, one can recognize that since Kant first formulated a concept homologous with it, namely *noumenon*, multitudinous philosophers have contrived a similar notion (e.g. the Uncanny of Freud and the Wholly Other of Levinas), and Chiba (2018) himself admitted that the phrase was “corresponding to what Lacan called Real” (p. 13).

Yet, he wanted neither to appropriate nor to rehash an existent idea. Instead, with the coinage, he sought to point up a prevalent preconception that has characterized and constrained “the structure of thinking in modern times” (Chiba, 2018, p. 16). Though the argumentation which comes after the above excerpt would come across to one as a little convoluted, it could essentially be viewed as consisting of two parts: the first is a methodical demonstration that modern thought has esteemed it to be an axiomatic fact that anything is a “meaningful nonsense”, i.e. a *duplex* entity which is discussible as a represented object but unknowable as an object existing independently of any relation (Chiba, 2018, pp. 14-16); the second is a contention that a path to get over the framework must be pursued because leaving it untreated will help excessive relativism to be rampant (Chiba, 2018, pp. 17-21).

Considering that shrewd criticisms of the problem have been put forward by other philosophers too, few will lodge an objection to Chiba’s diagnosis of modern thought.³ To cut a long story short, Chiba’s conception of and discussion on “meaningful nonsense” revealed that the widespread presupposition that everything is, while being dissectible as a representation, essentially unknowable should be confuted in that it could be abused as the theoretical foundation for nonsensical beliefs like fundamentalism, fanaticism, and extreme anarchism.

Even if Chiba had ceased writing the essay by pointing to the problematic presumption, it would have been a valuable text; however, the aspiring thinker did not adopt that course. In lieu, he proceeded to formulate another original concept which, in my estimation, could work as a catalyst for a drastic change in our worldview. That is “meaningless nonsense”. As is evident, Chiba invented the concept as the direct antithesis of “meaningful nonsense” and as the device with which to get one step ahead of the whole modern thought.

Preliminary to an investigation into it, allow me to make one point clear. As with any endeavor which strives to verbalize an idea which the world has never heard of, his version of the concept is far more intricate than that of “meaningful nonsense”; to be quite candid, Chiba should have applied Occam’s razor to it. In the sections spelling out the notion, he not only invoked theories of Quentin Meillassoux, Catherine Malabou, and Leo Bersani in a patchwork style, but also put unconventional reinterpretations on ideas of Freud, Bergson, and Lacan; besides, there are several digressive remarks on Aristotle, Aquinas, and Deleuze as well as a distant allusion to Levinas (see Chiba, 2018, pp. 21-38). Since it is beyond my ability to handle them all, the exposition below addresses itself to clarifying the particular concept and, hence, is expected to be read as a kind of reconstruction of the original account.

In any case, it would be palpable that the concept “*meaningless* nonsense” is the obverse of “*meaningful* nonsense”; thus, it would also be visible that its purport is opposite to that of the latter, whilst the usage is parallel. Let us look at a laconic definition which Chiba (2018) himself provided: “‘Meaningless nonsense’ is nonsense for its own sake, *nonsense in itself*” (p. 21). This terse account might sound indefinite; still, once one reflects that it is converse to the concept which we have just inspected, it would be much easier to grasp what it conveys. Given that “meaningful nonsense” signifies being nonsensically ambiguous, we should understand the above words as meaning that, in contrast to its antipode, “meaningless nonsense” stands for being *unambiguously noninterpretable*. When rephrased in more digestible parlance, it is a type of nonsense which absolutely shuts off any bid to make sense thereof. Accordingly, one can assume that, as with its counterpart, when used as a countable, it denotes an object as that which exists in that way.

Admittedly, many would never be satisfied with this brief and metaphysical explanation, of which Chiba (2018) should have been acutely conscious, for, immediately after the curt description,

he, though in somewhat figurative language, went on to illustrate the concept in more detail, delineating it as the “body” of an object:

The body [of someone/something] is a “meaningless nonsense”. It is a nonsense in itself. When someone/something takes a body, the “subtraction” from the infinite polysemy occurs, and then the meanings are made finite.... It is what is just the way it is.... The tautological body=form is a closed nonsense, a “meaningless nonsense”. It shuts off polysemy. The body=form is a stone that repels a rain of meanings.... It is what is merely *actual*, which is, as it were, “what dries up *potential*” (pp. 22-23; italics mine).

It is not necessary for us to be fastidious about the distinction between “body” and “form” in the passage since Chiba (2018) stated that he used them as basically “being on an equal footing” (p. 23). Rather, we should focus on seeing through the gist of his argument. Bearing in mind the epigrammatic definition analyzed just now, one can construe the passage as follows: the body/form of an object, whether it be that of a machine, a rock, a fox, or a person, should be regarded as an outright nonsense which peremptorily makes the object a finitely significant entity, and, since no existence lacks its body, every entity in the universe is a “meaningless nonsense”. Though this explication might seem an arbitrary reading of the text, its validity can be proven by the fact that later in the essay Chiba (2018) observed that “the entire world is a ritual” that is “made up of *chains of bodies*” (p. 29-30; italics added).

At this point, some may recall Chiba’s claim that every object is a “meaningful nonsense”, and doubt whether it is a justifiable thesis that everything is a “meaningful nonsense” and a “meaningless nonsense” at the same time. But we should be mindful that even if two conditions are contrastive to one another, it does not entail that they are always mutually exclusive. In the present case, one can reasonably presume that the two states are compatible in one entity by, in the sharp words of Chiba (2018), “doubling the two systems” (p. 27). Now it is indisputably clear that one of his intentions in propounding the concept is not to rashly reject modern thought but to dialectically overcome it by subtly inducing a fundamental turn in our attitude with which to face existences in the world. As the next section shows, when one accepts the theory, an object will be viewed as a *triplex* entity.

Before moving on further, however, it would be incumbent upon me to comment on what I have neglected to mention so as not to retard the flow of the account. As was alluded to, Chiba drew on a variety of thinkers for the invention of the two concepts that have been examined heretofore. Of the influences he should have received, that of Quentin Meillassoux is unmistakable and should not go untreated, though those who are conversant with contemporary philosophical discourses may have already noticed the association. Therefore, in closing this section, I discuss the issue briefly.

No one will dispute that Quentin Meillassoux, with his masterpiece entitled *After Finitude*, has exercised a drastic impact not only on various areas of philosophy but on miscellaneous other spheres of scholarship. Of course, it is out of the question to summarize his theory, which he has christened Speculative Materialism, with just some dozens of words. Still, most people would concur that amongst the arguments he has tendered, two are exceptionally sophisticated in their logic, thought-provocativeness, and applicability. One is the astute verdict that European philosophy since Kant’s transcendental idealism up to post-structuralism has been dominated and limited by what the French philosopher termed “correlationism”, namely the intellectual paradigm “according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (Meillassoux, 2008, p. 5); to express it more plainly, it is the ideology holding that “neither human nor world can exist without the other” (Harman, 2009, p. 178). The other, which is his contrivance to get the better of the orthodoxy, is the outré but well-demonstrated proposition dubbed “the principle of factuality”, the kernel of which is that “contingency *alone* is necessary” (Meillassoux, 2008, p. 80); to put it in more accessible terms, primordial contingency of the world is absolutely outside of correlationism (see Meillassoux, pp. 50-81).⁴

From the sketchy explication alone, one could espy the solid linkage between the thoughts of Chiba and Meillassoux as well as the former’s intellectual debt to the latter. Some might even fancy that if it had not been for Meillassoux’s theory, Chiba could not have come up with the distinction between the two types of nonsense, for it is so transparent that he was profoundly inspired by Meillassoux’s argute critique of correlationism and demonstration of ultimate fortuity as the elemental

framework defining the world. Yet, one should not be unaware of the innovative genius on Chiba's part. Whereas the Frenchman principally centered his inquiry on the world as a whole, Chiba's interest, as I have exhibited, consisted in individual entities too. Put differently, construing the Meillassoux's thought as that which showed the macrocosm was a "meaningless nonsense", Chiba perceived that every single one of the existences *in* the world should also be esteemed as a "meaningless nonsense".

Conclusion: The Triplex Entity

It is perhaps still unclear how one can innovate one's worldview by endorsing Chiba's idea. Certainly, unlike Derrida's "deconstruction" or Foucault's "bio-power", the notion could not be instantly applied to a critical inquiry into fiercely debated socio-political issues such as class discrimination or ethnic prejudice. However, its inability to immediately influence our society does not mean that it is less worthwhile. An in-depth dissection of the subject is beyond the scope of this short article; yet, as the closing discussion, I submit a tentative hypothesis to the theme.

In my current opinion, one of the most substantial effects of internalizing the view that literally every existence is a "meaningless nonsense" is enabling one not only to throw off the yoke of the Kantian dualism, but also, as I repeatedly announced in previous sections, to consider the world and all things therein to be *triplex* entities. According to this position, every single one of the existences is regarded as being finitely significant, infinitely polysemic, and unambiguously noninterpretable.

For further clarification, I ask you to think about a friend in a very casual fashion. Whereas few would reckon the person as an exchangeable being, the friend is normally viewed from a perspective that is specific and restricted, and, consequently, he or she appears as a being with a particular, that is, finite set of properties (e.g. as an opponent of a board game, as an adviser on a love affair, etc.). Needless to say, this is evidently a reductive understanding of the individual. As Kant and other modern thinkers have too sufficiently proved, we are on no account able to acquire a thorough knowledge of the friend because, if another perspective is adopted, he or she will appear with a different set of qualities and the number of other perspectives is, potentially speaking, unlimited. Having already made an investigation into it, we now know that though this type of logic has functioned as a rationale that energizes social constructionism, it has long curbed our thought. While being cautious of falling back to naïve dogmatism, we should heed an *actual* dimension of an existence. Inestimably ambiguous as any object may theoretically be, it always manifests itself as a unique (i.e. finite) entity differentiated from others by what shuts out interpretation, namely the body. Let me paraphrase the gist of my argument in colloquial terms: if I incessantly endeavor to understand you, I will discover innumerable aspects which you have; still, there is a moment when any approach is denied. That is not because you have the dark, inaccessible core, but because what makes you just the way you are is, though markedly unambiguous, simply beyond interpretation. Your presence is a *too evident* miracle.

As anyone who is well-versed in the history of philosophy could discern without a hitch, the opinion which I set forth is far from carefully polished. For instance, some may be inclined to assert that Graham Harman's Object-Oriented Ontology, which posits that everything is a *fourfold* entity, is more advanced (see Harman, 2002; 2009). In actuality, it behooves me to further strengthen the theoretical substratum and logical coherence.

Nonetheless, what is certain is that, in today's turbulent era, we must seek a singularly new paradigm upon which we ground our thoughts and actions. Neither Chiba's "meaningless nonsense" nor my pilot theory can be a panacea. But they will at least be of some use in letting one think outside the usual scope of thought. For instance, I am of the opinion that we could gain a subtle but invaluable hint as to how we should deport ourselves amidst the present *post-truth* condition where it often seems that each person believes in a totally disparate array of truths and an expression like "mutual understanding" or "peaceful coexistence" may come across as a hypnotic reverie.

Prior to the conclusion, I ask the readers to permit me to say a few words on this issue since it would still be rather obscure for many why "meaningless nonsense" can be a clue to how one ought to behave in this post-truth world where, according to the pessimistic expression of Richmond (2020), "truth is reduced to whatever is said to be the truth by those in positions of power or control" (30). To

come to the main point directly, the exact reason is once we admit that every existence is a “meaningless nonsense”, it will capacitate us to appreciate that each of the truths is also a “meaningless nonsense”, which logically leads us to be aware that the current situation is, indeed, “the inevitable outcome of greater epistemic democracy” (Fuller, 2018, p. 61). This point must be sometime discussed in a full paper; however, now I should be content with what I can verbalize at present.

When we take each and every existence under the firmament as a “meaningless nonsense”, we would be able to count a relation with someone as that which is inevitably possessed with the absolute unknowability. That is in no way resignation. Metaphorically speaking, the admission that each being dwells in a separate universe would be a terminus a quo whence one can build a contingent but firm connection with another, and, I aver, this should be a part of the mindset which one ought to assume in this demanding epoch. I will not call this essay a thesis; rather, this is a proposal, or an invitation.

Endnotes

¹ As for this wording, let me make these two things clear: the first is that this philosophical concept was first invented in Japanese as “Imiganai Muimi”, and the second is that the English phrase that Chiba himself had embraced to translate the original term had been “nonsense without sense” (see Taylor, 2019). Yet, I translated it into “meaningless nonsense” in this article because I judged that this simpler expression would convey the denotation and connotation of the original more accurately.

² Although I cannot perform an exhaustive examination in this brief annotation, it seems imperative for me here to allude to Kojin Karatani because it appears that the early thought of the renowned Japanese philosopher has at least an indirect influence on Chiba’s philosophy. Extremely simply put, the young Karatani, by elaborating on Derrida’s idea of deconstruction and on Gödel’s incompleteness theorems, proved that any seemingly perfect system, whether it be a language, a philosophical theory, or an axiomatic system of mathematics, must always and necessarily be incomplete and contain ultimately unprovable presumptions (see Karatani, 1995). Though it is too much for me to delve into this subject further now, it is indisputable that there is a parallelism between Karatani’s thesis and Chiba’s discussion about “meaningful nonsense”. This issue must be examined with condign sensitivity in a future study.

³ As for the philosophers criticizing the same problem in modern thought, Hiroki Azuma (1998), Graham Harman (2002) and Quentin Meillassoux (2008) can be adduced.

⁴ Meillassoux (2008) articulated the thrust of the theorem in the following words: “everything...is actually devoid of any necessary reason to be the way it is, and could actually change for no reason” (p. 83)

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