The Philosophy of Nonsense. By B. F. C. COSTELLOE, B.Sc. and M.A. Glasgow, B.A. Oxon.

To treat of Nonsense in any connection with the abnormal developments of the human mind may seem to some popular philosophers a solecism; but it is not. The connection is very real, and even, if one examines it, essential. The absurd in farce, or in dreams, or in insanity consists simply in the eccentricity of our association of ideas. It may be stated very simply, from a psychological point of view, as follows:—

Throughout the whole of our conscious mental life, and probably throughout all or most of our unconscious existence also, there is seething in our brains a world of infinite suggestion. Anything may suggest almost anything else. Chance "contiguities in place or time" arising out of past experiences, odd bits of partial resemblance, or what is in truth the same thing, quaint and far-fetched contrasts, are *primâ facie* as likely to be the tracks in which our suggestions or associations run as any of the saner or more rational connections of causation or logical relationship. But the sane man, in his waking life, controls this infinite play of suggestion. There is some inhibitory power of selective attention—or whatever else we choose to call it—by which he sets aside the useless eccentricities of the "brain currents," and reinforces, accentuates, selects, or, as we say, *attends to*, those associations only that will fit in with his rational life and subserve the purposes of his intellectual or moral activities. This selected residue supplies the mental furniture of the ordinary common-sense man. To allow the mind, either by a freak of choice or by a necessity of organisation, to run in tracks that are not in harmony with this sane and rational series of ideas is to be eccentric. To be, through organic defects or lesions, incapable of making or maintaining the ordinary selection, either in whole or in part, is to be monomaniac or mad.

But, at the same time, there are many stages short of these. Common-sense is common-place. The distinctly ordinary tracks of suggestion have, after all, a limited range. There are those to whom the more unusual relations of ideas appeal with special force, just because they are unusual; and such men become our geniuses, our poets, our wits. They form, among our masses of good,

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ordinary, sensible folk, that notable but luckless class of "original" men to whom the world owes the suggestion of its new ideas, and to whom it never altogether pardons their aberrations from the beaten way. And it is in this sense that "great wits" are "near allied to madness." For the unusual is as necessary a factor in the originality of all genius as it is in insanity or eccentricity. The cardinal difference, of course, remains. The genius is still rational, sane, healthy. He has, probably in a peculiar and subtle perfection, the normal faculty of controlling and selecting, and he guides the currents of his thoughts, whereas the other, having "lost his balance" through the morbid influence of some form of mental disease, no longer controls his ideas, but is controlled by them. He is at the mercy of the odd associations that have come to assume a morbidly vivid importance in his brain, and the rational suggestions of things have ceased to have as much cogency to him as some insane track of ideas and fancies.

Besides the originality of genius and art, however, there is a less momentous phase of the same thing, which in an unpretending way plays a large part in our lives. Every joke or pun, all the wit and humour of the world, is nothing but the bringing out of the odd eccentric suggestions among our ideas. Ordinary people pass them by; but to some they appeal with a peculiar force, and these are our "wits." Why the perception of some such quaintness should cause the agitation of the diaphragm, which we call laughter, is one of the unsolved mysteries of physiology; but the fact is not an unimportant one for the social life of the race. Many more of us would go mad if we had not the saving gift of laughter now and then.

Among those to whom odd connections are especially important we have to include all our children. This seems a singular fact, but it has an explanation. To the child all the world is new. The distinction between the commonplace and the unusual has not yet developed. Everything may be related, for aught we know, to everything else. His faculty of wonderment is continually exercised, and he is always ready for new marvels. "Philosophy begins in wonder," some one said; and it is at least true of our childhood. It is for this reason that "nonsense" plays such a curious part in our education of little people. We tell them strange stories, fairy tales, nursery rhymes—all kinds of things that are unmeaning—merely to catch their interest

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and amuse them. Now, there is no doubt this seems in certain ways open to objection. Children must be amused, no doubt. For that end, their singularly vivid *dramatic* faculty will naturally be appealed to by tales and mythical histories of all kinds; and if there were any chance that "nonsense" would ever be abolished from the nursery, it would be an evil seriously to be deplored. But it does not follow that our nonsense should not still carry a meaning. To talk nonsense merely to avoid saying anything is a waste of time; and in fact, as we have said, all such quaint connections of ideas have some sort of basis after all. You cannot talk absolute *nonsense* if you try. Perhaps it would be true to say that not even a madman could; for in all that we call nonsense there must be something which is a nexus between the ideas, and that, however useless for practical purposes, forms the connection between them, the motive and point of the joke, and the copula of our fantastic logic.

If, then, all nonsense must have some glimmering of an underlying idea, it is worth while to see that the suggestion it carries will not lead the child's fancy astray. To be always didactic is a fatal educational mistake, for the free play of suggestion is essential to the healthy development of a child's mind. It is greedy for new links and eager to follow every fresh track. To tie it down to rigid formulas of common-sense and commonplace before its time is a cruel anachronism. But there is nonsense and nonsense. "Punch and Judy," as has been often observed, is an immoral play. The point of it, amid all the wild absurdity, is the triumph of audacious villany. This, as Plato said of the nursery-tales in his day, is a bad sort of nurture to bring up our children on. So, again, there are any number of popular nursery-tales that emphasise a very questionable moral. "Jack and the Bean Stalk" is a case in point. The boy is first cheated into taking the beans for his mother's cow, and then, when the magic bean stalk affords him a way into the giant's home, he begins a reckless course of successful theft. In general, of course, anything is fair against giants, and anything is permitted, again, to the beautiful princesses and other fortunate and not very well-behaved characters of whom the story-books are full. Even when there are virtues emphasised it is the virtues of a savage—bravery, and cunning, and fidelity. There is little protest against lying, or sensuality, or cruelty. But we are not now concerned to

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discuss the moral question, though it is plain that "nonsense" which enshrines misleading moral ideas may have a very real ill-effect upon the rapidly-developing minds of a nursery. Perhaps it is unavoidable. The children's tales we still use are fragments of one of the oldest literatures in the world, and naturally do not look at things from our point of view; and to expurgate and euphemerise these inimitable histories would be a foolish and a useless endeavour. It is more to our purpose to point out that every one of them, however senseless it may seem at first sight, has still in it some latent thread and connection. It may be that the meaning is far to seek—that it can only be got at by the comparative philologist or the antiquarian, and has been wholly forgotten by the nurses and mothers, who repeat the same old words from generation to generation; but it *is* there all the same.

Beside these world-old fables and fragments, there has arisen in quite recent years an artificial nonsense—literature for the nursery—which, from a psychological point of view, is even more interesting. Not content with the ordinary routine of fairy tales, many ingenious writers, of whom "Lewis Carroll" is easily the first, have set themselves to write books of subtle nonsense for the amusement and bewilderment of the little people, and the attempt, with the aid of the skilful illustrative art now so happily in vogue, has succeeded wonderfully. It will be worth while to close this rambling essay on the philosophy of things nonsensical by analysing the drift and inner meaning of this new sort of literature.

Let us take for example either "Alice in Wonderland" or "Through the Looking Glass"—a pair of books which is already an established factor in the baby's universe. What is its end, and how does it achieve it?

Its end is partly to amuse and interest children, by puzzling them—to catch their attention and awaken their imaginations by a mystifying trick of talking nonsense so that it shall read like sense; and the means by which it achieves its end consist simply in a reduction to practice, with the aid of all the author's keen and subtle sympathy for child-nature, of the philosophy of nonsense in general. These books rely on three sorts of effects: first of all on the effect of surprise—*το ἀπροσδοκητον* as the Greek rhetors called it long enough ago; next, on the oddity of carrying out an impossible hypothesis to its rigid logical results; and,

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finally, on the underlying strain of gentle satire in which the author lightly touches the serious thoughts of the real world, and parodies them for those who will hear about them by-and-bye. The first of these three elements of interest is common, of course, to all such tales. The childish mind that looks through "the dreaming eyes of wonder" is not easily roused by startling things; for, as has been said, all the world is astonishing to it already. Therefore, to fix its attention and awaken any special interest you must make your marvels tolerably strong. But mere impossibilities will not make a good children's book; and the great merit of these little tales is that they clothe impossibility in a most bewitching logic of its own. The whole plot of "Through the Looking Glass," for example, turns on the quibble that in the world which you see when you look into a glass everything goes to the reverse end. Perhaps the quaintest instance of it, if an example may be pardoned here, is the White Queen's explanation of the effects of living backwards—"The things she remembers best are the things that happened the week after next."

It is this second principle of perverse logic, and the third of covert travesty, which make a book of this kind amusing to all people, of whatever age, who have a sense of humour. The beautiful "abstraction" of the grin from the face of the Cheshire Cat, the Hatter's Tea-party, at which cups were laid all round, and the three guests "moved on" when they wanted anything clean; the marvellous Croquet Party, at which the mallets were flamingoes and the balls porcupines—these and many other similar scenes in Lewis Carroll's books are instances of the fun that can be got by reasoning rigidly from absurd premises, as indeed, the madman is constantly doing. If further illustration of the third kind of nonsense association may be given, it will be found in one of the oddest features of these books, namely, their trick of quaint and sudden travesties of well-known philosophic formulæ. Epicurus said *πavτa ῥεῖ*—"All things are a flux." This is parodied in the eccentric shop where Alice finds that everything she wants has gone, before she can reach it, a shelf higher up. Or, again, the idealist supposes that the world and all that is therein may have no existence except in the thought of a universal mind. Accordingly, Alice is warned, when she finds the White King asleep, that she is only a "thing in his dream," and that if he were to wake "she would go out bang! like a candle."

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We might pursue this topic to any length, but enough has been said for this place. It only remains to notice that with a just psychological instinct the author casts these *jeux d'esprit* in the form of dreams; for it is in dreams that all the original oddity of our associations comes within our view. We said that chance contiguities or resemblances were *primâ facie* as likely to be the tracks along which our associations run, as any saner connection. That this is entirely true, provided we leave out of account the induced facility which habit gives to particular chains of connection among the brain-tracks, is clear enough when we consider the ways of dreaming. The inhibitory power of selection is in abeyance, or is very weak. As a result, the associations run riot. Anything calls up anything else. Even those that should be most habitual, and therefore most apt to recur at such a time, have far less marked preponderance than one expects. Chaos is the rule.

In a dream our mind is so far consciously active that the play of suggestion goes on among our mazes of remembered experiences, and that a limited amount of stimulus even from the external organs of sense is borne in upon the brain. Anything that happened to us in the past *may* be awakened by the wild play of dream associations. What will follow that it is impossible to tell. Yet there is always some nexus—some underlying logic; and if we can examine a very vivid dream we sometimes find the clue. Especially if we are near waking, our habits of logical connection lead us to argue aright from the most absurd hypothesis. But the results, of course, are never absurd to us in dreamland, because we are not *comparing* them with any standard of reality. We are passive to the play of ideas. The inhibitory action, the power of attention and selection, only begins in waking. Along with it arises the recurring sense of the distinction between those links of association and suggestion which have and those which have not a relation to the real world—to that series of thoughts or things which is amid this chaos the one and only cosmos, the ordered universe wherein each point is in its definite relations to all the rest. This distinction is the distinction between the real and unreal, between truth and fancy, between sense and nonsense. So long as we were in dreamland our ideas were in the empire of misrule, for among infinite possible combinations those which have a real meaning must be an insignificant minority. When we step out

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into the world again order is the first necessity of our waking life. We put back in an instant the whole irrelevant crowd of suggestions, and at once begin again the laborious and constant task of selecting and using for our needs those only that have a meaning. We hold the reins of thought, we check it from swerving either to the right hand or to the left; and so it travels forward in a fruitful fashion, and leads us on, with a career that is growing always swifter, over the infinite fields of knowledge.

Chemical Restraint and Alcohol. By F. Pritchard Davies,

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From the earliest historic period insanity seems to have been regarded as a disease that required restraint. The teaching of Conolly showed the fallacy of this view as regards mechanical restraint, and now—at all events in this country—medical psychologists are unanimous in condemning the practice, and the tendency is to give an ever increasing freedom to the mentally afflicted. Notwithstanding this, however, it cannot be denied that although the inmates of our asylums are no longer chained to walls, tied up in strong garments, or otherwise made harmless by mechanical means, a vast deal of what has very appropriately been termed "chemical restraint" goes on, and goes on, I believe, to the great injury of those it is supposed to benefit.

It is very easy to consider ourselves more humane than our ancestors and to laugh at the mistakes made by the physicians who have preceded us in the treatment of mental disease; but I think it not improbable, that the practice which is so general now, will at no distant date be scouted with equal derision to that we now heap upon the chains and cords of a bygone period. A change has already commenced, and is spreading fast. Chemical is following mechanical restraint, and will, I trust, soon become as obsolete a line of practice, only remembered as a matter of history or as something to be avoided.

There is very little difference in the reasoning which made our ancestors keep their patients quiet by means of ropes, chains, and cunningly-devised garments and the modern practitioner's administration of powerful drugs for the same purpose. Advance of knowledge made us see the folly of the

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