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Philosophical perspectives on metaphor

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Abstract

In this article, I offer a survey of the contributions of recent philosophy of language to the study of metaphor. I shall not discuss the ways in which metaphor has been treated in other branches of recent philosophy, for example the philosophy of science, nor, of course, the contributions of linguistics proper. Occasionally, I shall put forward a few ideas of my own, which have been suggested by the philosophical literature on the topic. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Let our pre-theoretical definition of metaphor be that it is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is directly applied to a thing (in the widest sense of the word) to which it is not literally, but only imaginatively, applicable. This is roughly the dictionary definition, and we shall be in a better position to assess it shortly. At any rate, it is clear how a metaphor differs, at least superficially, from a simile, in which the comparison of one thing with another is explicitly stated by such a word as 'like' or 'as'.

When I first took a course in the philosophy of language as an undergraduate,

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the text we used was Simon Blackburn's *Spreading the Word*, and I was somewhat disheartened at the time to read Blackburn's comment:

> I think nobody would claim that the study of metaphor has been one of analytical philosophy's brighter achievements (Blackburn, 1984, p. 180).

Roger M. White, in his recent monograph *The Structure of Metaphor*, concurs with Blackburn's assessment, and begins his book by remarking on the 'banal and hackneyed examples' (White, 1996, p. 1) of metaphor favored by the important analytical philosophers, such as John Searle, who have turned their attention to metaphor. In part, this banality is the result of recent philosophers dwelling exclusively on examples of metaphor of the subject-predicate form 'A is an F', such as 'All the world's a stage' or 'Juliet is the sun'. Blackburn and White also criticise the assumption made by such philosophers that understanding a metaphor is a matter of calculating or deriving the metaphorical meaning from the literal meaning, by the application of a set of rules.

I am in agreement with Blackburn and White, but I do think that **some** philosophers of language have made interesting and valuable contributions to the analysis of metaphor, and I propose to concentrate on the work of three: Max Black, Donald Davidson, and Roger White. After giving overviews of their accounts of metaphor, I shall discuss the cognitive function of metaphor, and the relation of metaphor to the similarities and analogies it serves to bring to our attention.

2. Black

Max Black's central hypothesis is that metaphorical meaning arises from an interaction, within a single sentence, between the metaphorical word and the literal words that make up the rest of the sentence (Black, 1962, 1979). On this view, the metaphorical word **gains a new meaning**, as a result of interaction with the rest of the sentence; one may call this the metaphorical sense of the word. Black introduced this notion of interaction to analytical philosophers, but he was by no means the first to analyse metaphor in terms of such an interaction; Black's work draws heavily on the writings of the literary critic I. A. Richards (Richards, 1936).

Black distinguishes between the **focus** and **frame** of a metaphor. The focus is the metaphorical element, the word or words used non-literally, and the frame is the literal remainder of the sentence. The focus is said to stand for the 'secondary subject' or 'subsidiary subject', the frame to stand for the 'primary subject' or 'principal subject'. Black's thesis is that a metaphor makes us apply, or project, a 'system of associated implications', about the secondary subject, to, or onto, the primary subject of the sentence. The metaphor selects and emphasises certain features of the primary subject, by applying to it statements that normally apply to the secondary subject (Black, 1962, pp. 39 ff).

The interaction Black postulates is that (a) the presence of the primary subject incites the hearer to select some of the secondary subject's properties; and (b) these 'associated implications' of the secondary subject invite the hearer to construct a corresponding set of associated implications that can fit the primary subject, thus making the hearer aware of certain features of the primary subject; and (c) parallel changes in the secondary subject are reciprocally induced, such that the meaning of the focus changes (in the sense that what the reader or hearer understands by the word alters) (Black, 1962, pp. 38–45; Black, 1979, pp. 28–29).

For Black, the 'system of associated implications' may comprise current and readily evocable 'commonplaces' or stereotypes, associated with the secondary subject by members of a certain linguistic community (Black, 1962, p. 40). If we take the example of the focus 'wolf' in 'Man is a wolf', then there is a shared set of standard beliefs about wolves prevalent in our linguistic community, such as that a wolf is fierce and treacherous. Alternatively, 'a metaphor may introduce a novel and non-platitudinous 'implication-complex' (Black, 1979, p. 29).

The 'system of associated implications' that accompanies the secondary subject has then to be applied to the primary subject. This attempt leads the hearer to construct a set of 'implications' about the primary subject, by emphasising those traits of the primary subject which the 'system of associated implications', accompanying the secondary subject, 'fits'. For example, 'Man is a wolf' leads the reader to reflect on human traits such as aggression and treachery. Finally, the meaning of the focus itself changes. So, a wolf, in our example, comes to seem more like a human.

It is an important, and plausible, implication of Black's view of metaphor that the comprehension of a metaphor depends on understanding the literal meaning of the metaphor, in so far as it requires applying one's beliefs about the literal referent of the metaphorical focus.

Black's early work on metaphor has sometimes (e.g., Searle, 1979, p. 100) been taken to be an example of a 'semantic' approach to metaphor, in which a theory of metaphorical sentence-meaning is offered. On such a view, it is held that certain **linguistic** items, namely words or sentences, have metaphorical meanings, in addition to their literal meanings. But in 'More about Metaphor', Black stresses that the shift from literal meaning to metaphorical meaning is 'a shift in the **speaker's** meaning — and the corresponding **hearer's** meaning — what both of them understand by words, as used on the particular occasion' (Black, 1979, p. 29).

Similarly, John Searle's approach to metaphor is to locate the metaphor at the level of speaker's meaning or utterance meaning, rather than sentence-meaning or semantic meaning, that is in terms of what the speaker means or **intends** on a given occasion, rather than in terms of what a linguistic expression means in a given language. Searle too attempts to state the principles which describe how the hearer or reader infers this metaphorical utterance meaning from the literal meaning of a given metaphorical sentence, and the context of the utterance (Searle, 1979). Taking pragmatics to be the theory of speaker's meaning, and of the principles whereby conversational context contributes to communication,

Searle's and Black's theories are both examples of the 'pragmatic' approach to metaphor, though Searle certainly makes this more explicit.

The pragmatic approach, based on the view that metaphorical meaning is a kind of speaker's meaning, is probably the most common amongst philosophers of language. Its central tenet is that 'the speaker means metaphorically something different from what the sentence means literally' (Searle, 1979, p. 92), a respect which distinguishes metaphorical utterance from literal utterance, in which 'the speaker means what he says' (Searle, 1979, p. 96), and assimilates metaphor to irony, in which one frequently means the contradictory of what one says. In what follows, several objections to this view will emerge.

3. Davidson

Another important analytical philosopher who has taken an influential approach to metaphor is Donald Davidson. In what is perhaps the best-known paper on metaphor in philosophy of language, Davidson argues against the notion that words can have a metaphorical **meaning** or sense, whether sentence-meaning or speaker's meaning; he locates the metaphor instead in the use of a sentence. Furthermore, for Davidson, understanding a metaphor is necessarily or essentially a creative, imaginative endeavour. There can be no manuals or rule-books for understanding metaphor. Metaphor is removed from the theory of meaning altogether (Davidson, 1984).

Davidson rejects the idea, common to most preceding philosophical accounts of metaphor, that a metaphorical sentence has a metaphorical meaning, or expresses a communicable metaphorical truth. For Davidson, metaphors do not have, in addition, to their literal sentence meaning, another, metaphorical meaning. The literal meaning of a metaphorical sentence exhausts its meaning. Davidson emphasises that metaphors cannot be paraphrased, but, for him, this is not because metaphors say something too novel for literal expression, but because there is nothing in a metaphor to paraphrase. What a metaphor accomplishes is different in kind to literal meaning, not just another type of meaning.

> I depend on the distinction between what words mean and what they are used to do. I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use. It is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences, and depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those words and hence on the ordinary meanings of the sentences they comprise (Davidson, 1984, p. 247).

Whereas a simile explicitly asserts that there is a likeness and leaves it to us to pick out some common feature, a metaphor does not explicitly assert a likeness, but again leads us to seek common features, invites us to make comparisons, directs our attention to similarities, to 'unexpected or subtle parallels and analogies' (Davidson, 1984, p. 256).

Davidson's paper is mainly critical, and he provides only a very sketchy

positive account of what the uses of a metaphorical sentence are, of what the uses have in common in virtue of which they are metaphorical. We are told that it is 'something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences', but not much else. 'Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact' (Davidson, 1984, p. 262). For Davidson, a metaphor 'nudges us into noting' something (p. 253); a successful metaphor may be said to have 'bullied' us into noticing a similarity (p. 256). These are, of course, themselves metaphorical expressions, and their exact use is unclear.

Nevertheless, Davidson's negative arguments are powerful. Davidson points out that referring to the 'meaning' of a word only has explanatory power, with regard to a particular context of use (or sentence), if the meaning of the word can be given independently of this use (or sentence) (Davidson, 1984, p. 247). We can only make sense of the metaphorical meaning of a word contributing to the meaning of the sentence in which it occurs if the word has its metaphorical meaning independently of its occurrence in this sentence. So, if the metaphorical meaning of a word is regarded as being produced by interaction with other words in a particular sentence (or is regarded, say, as lying in the intentions of the speaker on a particular occasion of use), then talk of the metaphorical 'meaning' has no explanatory power.

In the case of a simile, we are not, according to Davidson, tempted to endow the words with a second, figurative meaning, apart from its literal meaning of statement of resemblance. It is strange that we are so tempted in the case of metaphor.

> In general, critics do not suggest that a simile says one thing and means another — they do not suppose it **means** anything but what lies on the surface of the words. It may make us think deep thoughts, just as a metaphor does; how come, then, no one appeals to the 'special cognitive content' of the simile? (Davidson, 1984, pp. 260-261).

And Davidson provides another, powerful argument against the views that assume that metaphor is a second, figurative type of meaning. Consider dead metaphors such as 'I'm feeling down today', 'the mouth of a river' or 'We must fight inflation'. Davidson, like proponents of the standard, pragmatic approach to metaphor (cf. Black, 1979, p. 26), assumes that dead metaphors are not metaphors at all. The metaphorical term is said to have acquired an established, conventional meaning, which may be listed in a dictionary, i.e., a new literal meaning, and the effect on the hearer is no longer that the hearer is stimulated to notice a similarity or analogy. Davidson argues that if active metaphor involved a second meaning, the figurative meaning, then we would expect this figurative meaning to be retained, if and when the metaphor becomes a dead metaphor, as the literal meaning of the dead metaphor. But take as an example 'He was burned up'. When the metaphor was active, we would have pictured fire in the eyes or smoke coming out of the ears. As a dead metaphor, however, this metaphorical meaning

is not retained. This now suggests no more than that he was very angry. Therefore, metaphor does not involve a second meaning (Davidson, 1984, p. 253).

Roger White too rejects the notion of words having a metaphorical meaning, and one reason White gives for rejecting the idea of the metaphorical meaning is inspired by Davidson's critique. White points out that the point of talking of the 'meaning' of individual words is to explain the similarities and differences between different uses of the same word in different sentences. But the metaphorical use of a word in one sentence does not guide us in interpreting the metaphorical use of a word in another sentence. For example, Black would have it that the metaphorical 'meaning' of a word is determined by an interaction with the literal part of the particular sentence in which it occurs: as White points out, we cannot infer the metaphorical meaning of 'lion' in 'Beethoven was a lion' from its metaphorical meaning in 'Achilles was a lion' (White, 1996, pp. 181–182, 192). Ascribing metaphorical 'meanings' to words is therefore unacceptable.

Davidson has a further negative point, which is less plausible. Putting aside the issues surrounding talk of metaphorical 'meaning', Davidson also rejects the notion that metaphorical communication involves the interpreter grasping a specific cognitive content that the author wishes to convey (Davidson, 1984, pp. 261–262). For Davidson, a metaphorical utterance does not make a statement or claim; its use is completely unlike that of an assertion. We must, according to Davidson, give up the idea that a metaphor carries a message, or has a non-literal meaning or specific content. The thoughts a metaphor provokes must not be read into the content or meaning of the metaphor.

Davidson insists that he is not merely being restrictive about what to include as meaning. The error he is attacking is thinking that, associated with a metaphor, there is a cognitive content the author wishes to convey and that the hearer must grasp, in order to understand the intended message. In fact, 'there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character' (Davidson, 1984, p. 263). Metaphor, that is, is open-ended, and what we notice or see through the use of metaphor is not some truth or fact. In both these respects, a metaphor is more like a picture than like a simile, and cannot be given literal expression. This is why there can be no literal paraphrase.

If Davidson's point is merely that a metaphor does not typically convey only a single content (which could be given in a finite paraphrase), his remark seems plausible. But Davidson appears to be making a stronger point, namely that metaphorical utterances do not assert anything at all, that there is no 'message' or 'content' conveyed by a metaphor, but, rather, metaphors perform entirely different speech-acts: they **invite** us to explore comparisons, **make** us notice similarities, **use** a situation as an image of another, and so on. It has been pointed out that this is a more plausible claim for literary metaphors than for metaphors as used in everyday language (Harries, 1979, p. 170).

In addition, there are a number of significant differences between the effects of metaphor and the effects of a dream or a bump on the head with which Davidson compares metaphor (Davidson, 1984, p. 262). Most importantly, the

interpretation of a metaphor is guided by the audience's beliefs about the intentions of the author of the metaphor. Searle's work on metaphor is one attempt to describe principles by which an audience infers the speaker's intended meaning from the literal meaning of a given metaphorical sentence. Now, one might agree with Davidson's insistence that there can be no rule-books for understanding metaphor. But, however exactly the comprehension occurs, it is invariably sensitive to the speaker's or author's intentions and beliefs, in a way that distinguishes the effects of metaphor from the effects of a dream or bump on the head. However, one has to concede that this line of thought is compatible with the claim that the intentions of the speaker are not to convey a 'message' or 'content', but to produce such effects as giving insights, conveying new ideas, and making us notice similarities.

Davidson's central contribution to the study of metaphor has, then, been to argue that there is no such thing as metaphorical meaning, whether semantic or pragmatic. In so doing, he has provided a controversial alternative to the standard philosophers' view that metaphor is a species of speaker's meaning. (See Cooper, 1986 for a monograph-length example of the 'metaphor without meaning' approach.)

4. White

There has been a tendency in philosophy of language, as in linguistics, to assume that an instance of metaphorical usage involves a single word or phrase, forming an isolable syntactic unit, being used metaphorically within an otherwise literal sentence. Thus, when Max Black distinguishes between the 'focus' and the 'frame' of a metaphor, where the 'focus' is the word or words used metaphorically, and the 'frame' is the literal remainder of the sentence, his example of a focus is a single word ('plowed' in 'The chairman plowed through the discussion') (cf. White, 1996, p. 10). White calls such accounts 'theories of the metaphorical word'.

White rejects the common view that metaphors are individual words and, by contrast, takes metaphors to be very complex linguistic structures. The task of distinguishing, in a given metaphorical sentence, between words used metaphorically and words used literally is problematic in a way Black and Searle had not considered. For White, Black's focus-frame distinction cannot be applied to examples of metaphors in which several words are being used metaphorically. He prefers a distinction, within a metaphorical sentence, between the literal 'primary vocabulary', and the 'secondary vocabulary' which introduces the metaphorical comparison. Whereas, for Black, the metaphorical 'focus' and literal 'frame' must be distinct, so that they may interact with each other, White's 'primary vocabulary' and 'secondary vocabulary' may overlap.

The simplest example White uses to clarify this is 'Tolstoy was a great infant'. Here we see the ambiguity that is characteristic of metaphor. Is the adjective 'great' applicable to Tolstoy, or only to the infant with which Tolstoy is

compared? If we interpret the metaphor as comparing the great Tolstoy to an infant, rather than comparing Tolstoy to an overgrown infant, then we find that the 'secondary vocabulary' comprises the words 'a…infant', rather than 'a great infant'. Since the primary and secondary vocabularies intermingle, we cannot isolate a single continuous element which could serve as Black's 'focus' (White, 1996, pp. 18–20).

But the assumption that metaphors are uses of single words has another crucial fault. White's most important contribution to the study of metaphor is to point to what he calls 'bifurcated construals' of metaphors, in which a word or words is used both literally and metaphorically. We may construe 'Tolstoy was a great infant' as comparing Tolstoy, the great novelist, to an overgrown infant. If so, the word 'great' belongs to both the 'primary vocabulary' and the 'secondary vocabulary' of the sentence. There is no sense in which 'great' is part of the 'focus', and not the 'frame', or vice versa.

Again, when Shakespeare describes Caesar's blood 'rushing out of doors, to be resolv'd / if Brutus so unkindly knock'd or no' (*Julius Caesar*, III, ii, 181–182), it is only because 'rushing' is both a literal description of the movement of Caesar's blood ('primary vocabulary') and part of a metaphor of someone hurrying out of doors ('secondary vocabulary'), that the metaphor works so well (White, 1996, pp. 12–14, 23–24). Shakespeare's metaphor of autumn trees as 'Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang' (Sonnet 73) involves bifurcation; 'bare' applies literally to the boughs, as well as forming part of the metaphor of the deserted monastery (White, 1996, pp. 33–34).

White points out how very prevalent and important such bifurcated construals of metaphors are in literature. For example, the revival of a dead metaphor in poetry frequently involves bifurcation, where the literal meaning of a word and its earlier metaphorical meaning are both invoked. Yet such uses of metaphor, along with ambiguity of construal of metaphor, have been largely ignored by philosophers of language, until White.

Where earlier philosophers of language took metaphorical usage to involve an individual word being used metaphorically within an otherwise literal sentence, White stresses single metaphors that occupy entire sentences. The mistake White rejects is not the exclusive preserve of analytical philosophers; White discusses various contorted interpretations literary critics have provided for the word 'unbookish' in Iago's prediction that Othello's 'unbookish jealousy must construe/ Poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behavior/ Quite in the wrong' (*Othello*, IV, i, 101–102). The interpretations cited share the assumption that the metaphor consists in the metaphorical use of 'unbookish' in an otherwise literal sentence, instead of taking 'unbookish' together with 'construe'.

White's positive theory of metaphor regards a metaphor as a 'linguistic hybrid' of what he calls primary and secondary sentences. Consider Iago's metaphorical sentence 'His unbookish jealousy must construe poor Cassio's smiles, gestures, and light behavior quite in the wrong'. The 'primary vocabulary' here (replacing words that belong **only** to the 'secondary vocabulary' with variables) is 'His x jealousy must construe poor Cassio's smiles, gestures and light behaviors quite in

the wrong'. The 'secondary vocabulary' (replacing words that belong **only** to the 'primary vocabulary' with variables) is 'Unbookish *x* must construe *y* quite in the wrong'. A 'secondary sentence' is the result of making appropriate substitutions in the 'secondary vocabulary', so as to give a description of a hypothetical situation with which the actual situation is being compared. We might have 'The unbookish schoolboy must construe the *Iliad* quite in the wrong', for example. A 'primary sentence' is the result of making appropriate substitutions in the 'primary vocabulary', so as to give a literal description of the actual situation. We might have 'His uncultured jealousy must construe poor Cassio's smiles, gestures and light behaviors quite in the wrong'.

For White, the actual metaphorical sentence should be regarded as the result of juxtaposing two other sentences, one describing the actual situation (the 'primary sentence'), the other describing a hypothetical situation with which the metaphor is comparing that situation (the 'secondary sentence'), and then constructing a new 'hybrid' sentence, composed of words that occur in one or both of the two original sentences (the latter possibility allowing for bifurcation) (White, 1996, pp. 77–79).

A metaphor, then, is 'a sentence that may be regarded as a sentence that has arisen from the conflation of two other, grammatically analogous sentences', one of which would give a literal description of the actual situation, the other of which would describe a situation with which the metaphor invites us to compare the actual situation (White, 1996, pp. 79–80). Such a conflation invites us to explore similarities and differences between the two situations, and to see the actual situation in terms of the other. Descriptions of two different situations are superimposed to produce a sentence that describes both at the same time, leading us to view one situation in terms of the other.

The reader's tasks are, then, to determine what is primary vocabulary and what is secondary vocabulary, to reconstruct the primary and secondary sentences, and to explore the similarities and differences between the two situations described by these two sentences. The crucial process of interpretation, which need not be conscious, lies in working out the primary and secondary sentences. It is a process of narrowing down the possible primary and secondary sentences on the principle of making the metaphorical sentence relevant to its context in the poem, play, conversation, etc. in which its occurs. We accept secondary sentences that accommodate the metaphor to its immediate context.

White's account of metaphor arising from such a conflation of primary and secondary sentences is not intended as a direct description of the actual process of composing metaphors; the author will not typically first formulate primary and secondary sentences, and then juxtapose them. Rather, representing a metaphor as having been constructed by juxtaposing two other sentences serves to bring out the linguistic structure of a metaphor.

White notes that the secondary sentence will typically contain indefinite terms (e.g. 'the schoolboy'), or 'dummy names' (A, B, C) or proper names which could be replaced by similar names ('The Iliad'). But, instead of producing a secondary sentence in this way, we could keep the original metaphorical sentence under

analysis, and simply treat or view parts of the primary vocabulary (e.g. 'poor Cassio's smiles, gestures and light behaviors') as if they were dummy names (in this case, regarding that phrase as if it were the name of a rather difficult book). If we do so, it becomes a description of the hypothetical situation of the construal of a difficult book. And, conversely, if we treat parts of the secondary vocabulary ('unbookish') as referring to parts of the actual situation, then the sentence becomes a description of the actual situation.

In this way, White regards the metaphorical sentence as a sentence constructed in such a way that it allows for two different readings. The 'primary sentence' corresponds to one reading, the 'secondary sentence' to the other. By superimposing one sentence on the other, the metaphorical sentence invites or leads us to see the situation described by the primary sentence as if it were the situation described by the secondary sentence.

White proceeds to consider a number of extended metaphors from literature, and provides some fine literary analysis. This has not been very common in philosophical treatments of metaphor. And it is more or less impossible if it is assumed that an instance of metaphorical usage involves an individual word being used metaphorically within an otherwise literal sentence. But, although White insists that primary and secondary sentences could be constructed for the complex examples he discusses, he prefers a less formal approach, and the exact application to the examples, of his theory of metaphor as linguistic hybrid, is not always clear.

5. The cognitive functions of metaphor

Davidson, Blackburn and White stress the open-endedness of metaphor. If a metaphor sets up a comparison between two situations, which the reader is invited to **explore**, with much of the success of a metaphor depending on the pleasure of exploration (Blackburn, 1984, p. 175), then the number of respects in which the two situations are comparable is not fixed. This is itself a powerful objection to the view that there is such a thing as metaphorical meaning. If the interpretation of a metaphor is open-ended, it cannot make sense to speak of **the** metaphorical meaning of words within a metaphorical sentence; this is to suggest that there is one and only one definite set of comparisons (Blackburn, 1984, pp. 171 ff, White, 1996, pp. 173–180). And the fact that metaphors encourage the audience to explore similarities and to produce new thoughts is, again, a powerful objection to Searle's attempt to locate the meaning of a metaphorical utterance entirely in speaker's meaning. The fact that a metaphor admits of an indefinite number of valid interpretations is incompatible with the theory that metaphorical meaning lies in the intentions of the speaker (cf. Cooper, 1986, pp. 70–77).

What are the cognitive effects of metaphor, and how do metaphors relate to the similarities or resemblances that they draw our attention to? Black initially suggested (Black, 1962, p. 37) that, with some metaphors, it would be more illuminating to say that the metaphor creates a similarity (between principal and

subsidiary subjects) than that it formulates an antecedently existing similarity. A number of philosophers criticised Black's view, pointing out that metaphor might bring a feature into prominence, make us notice it, but could not create similarity. Later, Black replied (Black, 1979, pp. 37-40) that similarity is not something objective which language could not create; it is part of our subjective experience, to be compared with looking taller than, rather than being taller than. Metaphor could, he argued, create an aspect of subjective reality.

Suppose we accept that metaphor leads us to notice similarity. Black then emphasises that similarity is subjective. That is, whether or not similarity is independent of language, it is not, he argues, independent of human experience. Whether two things are similar depends in some way on our experience of them. This may be correct, though much depends on what one means by 'similar', and how similarity is thought to differ from what philosophers call 'identity of property', but it does not follow that it is right to say that metaphor can create similarity.

Similarity may be subjective, but this is not to say that, for a similarity to exist, we must **in fact** notice it. It makes perfect sense to say that there was a similarity between the two murders that no-one noticed at the time. So it is not necessary, for a similarity to exist, that it be noticed. It may, however, be necessary, for a similarity to exist, that it be **noticeable** by someone. But then, if a metaphor only makes us **in fact** notice a similarity, it does not create that similarity, because it does not make us **able** to notice the similarity. A case of creating a similarity would be surgically altering the brain, so that people were now able to see a similarity we cannot detect. But this does not happen with metaphor.

It is initially tempting to accept the suggestion that metaphor may create a similarity. I think what people have in mind when they say that a metaphor creates a similarity is that a metaphor may make people notice a similarity not generally noticed before. But, as we have seen, this is not creating a similarity. The metaphor Aristotle cites in which the sun, scattering its rays, is spoken of as 'sowing his god-created flame' (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b, 26–30) does not create a similarity between the scattering of the rays and the sowing of corn that did not exist before. A metaphor may make us notice similarities, but they are similarities that exist prior to and independently of language, and that we could be brought to notice in different ways, for example by a corresponding picture (of the rays of the sun, in this case).

So far, we have been assuming that the interpretation of metaphors involves making a comparison or noticing a similarity between two situations or objects. But philosophers have noted that there need not be an identifiable similarity between the actual and hypothetical situations. Searle considers this matter, in his discussion of 'Sally is a block of ice'.

> The trouble is that there do not seem to be any literal similarities between objects which are cold and people who are unemotional that would justify the view that when we say metaphorically that someone is cold what we mean is that he or she is unemotional. In what respects exactly are

> unemotional people like cold objects? Well, there are some things that one cay say in answer to this, but they all leave us feeling somewhat dissatisfied (Searle, 1979, p. 108).

Searle does not express this problem as powerfully as he might. Given the way he expresses it — in terms of there being no 'literal similarity' between unemotional people and cold objects — one might reply that this is relative to language. If one means by 'literal similarity', a similarity that can be expressed using only literal language, then it may be that one language could express the similarity between unemotional people and cold objects, and another cannot.

But I think a stronger point can be made: that, whereas in some metaphors, the underlying similarity is perceivable, in the sense that a common feature between the entities being compared is perceptually verifiable, in other cases, the similarity is not perceivable, but is a matter of our tendency to associate the two entities in question, or our having identical responses to them. In these cases, there is not an identifiable similarity. Rather,

> as a matter of perceptions, sensibilities, and linguistic practices, people find the notion of coldness associated in their minds with lack of emotion. The notion of being cold just is associated with being unemotional (Searle, 1979, p. 108).

The class of such metaphors which do not have perceivable similarities underlying them is enormous. Consider our spatial metaphors for time. Metaphors for subjective temporal duration typically derive from velocity — 'time flies', 'time passes slowly'; yet there is arguably nothing that time does which is literally like flying or even literally like moving. There is some association that we make between subjective temporal duration and visible movement, but there is not a literal or perceptual similarity, no identifiable common feature, between time and movement. Similarly, consider metaphors for human emotions and character (he/she is warm, cold, shallow, empty, light, colourful); for mental activity ('cracking up': the mind as a brittle object); or for human institutions and practices (marriage as binding, argument as attack and defence).

Those conceptual domains which are thought of in such pervasively metaphorical terms are, I think, typically those that are abstracted from the senses, and therefore inexpressible literally in perceptual language. Instead, the language of the perceptual is transferred by metaphor to such domains. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, a linguist and a philosopher, argue in *Metaphors We Live By* that the use of metaphor is often systematic, and that entire conceptual structures can be metaphorical in character. According to Lakoff and Johnson, we structure thought and experience in one conceptual domain via the experiential structure of another domain. For example, we organise our concept of argument via our concept of war, in so far as we talk, e.g., of attacking, defending, demolishing and winning an argument, and of arguments involving positions and

strategies (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, pp. 5 ff). Lakoff and Johnson argue that certain conceptual domains, for example, the concept of love,

> are structured almost entirely metaphorically.... This is typical of emotional concepts, which are not clearly delineated in our experience in any direct fashion and therefore must be comprehended primarily indirectly, via metaphor (p. 85).

Even assuming Black was wrong when he asserted that metaphors can create similarities, there is good reason to believe that metaphors can alter our concepts, and create new ways of thinking, particularly about conceptual domains lying outside the realm of perceptual experience.

The work of Lakoff and Johnson suggests that it might be more fruitful not to treat dead metaphors, such as 'Her argument was attacked', 'He cracked up' and 'She is cold' in the standard way, that is as failing to be metaphors at all. Because they belong to a systematic way of thinking about one thing in terms of another, these metaphors are far from dead. David Cooper has expressed the point well.

> (I)t is natural, if not inevitable, to regard systematic established metaphor as partially structuring our thought about one kind of thing in terms of another. If so, it is actually achieving, in its quiet way, what many fresh metaphors more stridently invite us to begin doing. We are blinded by this if we focus on an isolated example, like 'waste time', and are impressed by its failure to conjure up, any longer, images of rubbish dumps or squandered cash. Taken in isolation, the expression may be of little moment, but taken alongside a battery of related expressions — 'invest time', 'giving time', 'save time'. etc. — it is hard to resist the impression that something of importance in our thinking about, and attitude towards, time is marked (Cooper, 1986, p. 135).

A common view amongst philosophers and literary critics, which Black and Davidson, for example, both frequently emphasise, is the idea that a metaphor makes us **see** one thing **as** another.

> Metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight. Since in most cases what the metaphor prompts or inspires is not entirely, or even at all, recognition of some truth or fact, the attempt to give literal expression to the content of the metaphor is simply misguided (Davidson, 1984, p. 263).

On this view, metaphor typically involves seeing one thing **as another**; we see knowledge as an edifice that requires foundations, we see time as something that flows. Is there a pervasive and irreducible element of 'seeing as' in metaphorical thought? We have seen that some metaphors cannot be given an analysis in terms even of an indefinite set of literal similarities. Perhaps this is why.

Black suggests that, with a good metaphor, we want to say we have a 'flash of insight', in which we think of, or see, A as B, not merely that we

compare A with B. He then asks what it is to see something as another. Perhaps, just as we can see Wittgenstein's 'duck-rabbit' as a duck or as a rabbit, or the drawing of a Necker cube as facing in one direction or in another, so we can see education as sheep-herding, *à la* Ezra Pound, or we can see emotionality as warmth. But, Black suggests, this is not apt, as in the former cases we are just seeing one thing we have previously learnt to discern, in another. With metaphor, on the other hand, we are required to make conceptual innovations. Black then suggests various preferable analogies, such as seeing a straight line as a collapsed triangle, in which the concept of a triangle undergoes transformation (Black, 1979, pp. 32–34).

The 'seeing as' treatment of metaphor seems more plausible for some metaphors than for others. The comparison is with seeing one perceptual object as another. Perhaps when I hear that 'Sam is a pig', I see him momentarily as a pig, snuffling and snorting over his food. Similarly, I might see Richard as a lion, Mavis as a dragon, and so on. Here, both secondary subject and primary subject are living beings with identifiable perceptual similarities allowing for the possibility of seeing one as another. But, the view seems much less plausible when one considers, say, 'Eternity is a spider in a Russian bath-house' or 'Life is the transmission and reception of information'. How are we to use the analogy of seeing one perceptual object as another here? It makes little sense to talk of 'seeing' life or eternity, less to speak about 'seeing' life or eternity 'as' something other than it is (cf. Cooper, 1986, pp. 233–234). And, as we have noted, sentences in which a concept which is not given to us in perceptual experience is described in metaphorical terms are pervasive examples of metaphor. Yet, if we are not to take the 'seeing as' analogy in perceptual terms, it becomes a metaphor itself, and we are no closer to understanding the kind of cognition involved in understanding a metaphor.

It might be argued, following the hints in Searle, that the grounding of many metaphors, such as the metaphor that talks of emotionality as warmth, lies not in outward perceptual similarities, nor in seeing one thing as another, so much as in a similarity in our **responses** — the pleasant, comforting, satisfying associations of literal warmth, and our similar responses to human sympathy, attention and care. Projection of a feeling or response, which does not come from sight or sound, may be the origin of many of the most pervasive metaphors. Consider the metaphor of dryness applied to our spiritual life, as in T.S. Eliot's poetry; the metaphorical application of our sense of speed of movement to subjective time; or the metaphorical application of our sense of solidity to knowledge, in the metaphor of the foundations of knowledge.

The drought metaphors in Eliot show the extent to which a metaphorical scheme may structure our way of understanding an aspect of human life. The metaphor occurs in such lines as 'Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season' (from 'Gerontion'), or these:

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
(from 'The Hollow Men')

Here we may not be able to identify at all clearly, in literal language, the aspect of the human condition which Eliot is portraying. Critics' attempts, in such terms as 'the spiritual sterility of the post-Enlightenment world' inevitably bring us up against metaphors — sterility, enlightenment — again. It seems that sometimes we can structure our experience in one domain only through the imposition of the structure of our experience in another, which we directly apprehend. Thus we project our responses to the quality of dryness onto our understanding of human life.

It has often seemed to philosophers that a specific metaphor, particularly in poetry or literary prose, is the **only** means to achieving the particular effect it achieves, that what a particular, successful metaphor conveys could only have been conveyed by that metaphor. I shall not consider this in detail, but I offer for reflection one possible example of what philosophers here have in mind. Consider Eliot's 'heart of light' metaphor, which recurs in *The Waste Land* (1922) and in *Burnt Norton* (1935), from *Four Quartets*, in each case to describe an otherwise ineffable experience which we can only place in context, and not literally elucidate, except by the words Eliot chooses to use.

In *The Waste Land*, there is a recollection of a young man and a woman, his lover, returning from a garden walk:

Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
(*The Waste Land*, I, 37–41)

In this passionate moment, the man is bereft of sight and of the ability to communicate, and, in this state, experiences a state of revelation which Eliot can only describe as awareness of 'the heart of light, the silence'.

Later, in *Burnt Norton*, from *Four Quartets*, Eliot, now middle-aged, walks with a woman whom he loves in a country garden and, as he comes across an empty pool of dry concrete, he sees it suddenly seem to fill with water, and has an unforgettable, but literally indescribable vision of ultimate reality. He records this sublime moment, and can only do so with metaphor, the **same** metaphor.

Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged.
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,
The surface glittered out of heart of light
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool
Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.
(from *Burnt Norton*, I)

I would surmise that Eliot used the same metaphor because he could find no better expression in language for the ineffable experience than this metaphor evoking our immediate, human response to light. Would the poet be content with a rough literal synonym, or does only that word serve? I feel I want to insist that this is the only expression that will serve. The idea or content that is being expressed may be verbally expressed only in the words of the metaphor itself. If so, it might be thought that we have further evidence for Davidson's view that a metaphor does not express a cognitive content, which can be 'detached' from the metaphor itself, and which the metaphor expresses.

But there is a good reason to be wary of such an inference, and with this matter, I bring this survey to a close. The possibility of an alternative, prose paraphrase for a metaphor should not be regarded as a necessary condition of the metaphor conveying a cognitive content. It may be possible to entertain a cognitive content by comprehending a non-linguistic representation such as a picture or memory. We should be careful about the claim that 'heart of light' is the only form of expression that will convey what Eliot intends to convey. It is arguably the only expression in language that would serve. But there are other possible forms of representation of a pool filled with sunlight we must not forget. Language may not be necessary to evoke the 'heart of light'. Perhaps Monet could have painted it.

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