
METAPHOR

David E. Cooper

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Metaphor

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The Emergence of Metaphor

I dimly remember that, as a schoolboy, I felt at once intrigued by metaphor and disappointed at the way it was discussed by my English teachers. I may even recall the grounds for those two feelings. In those days, a sharp distinction was clung to between English Language and English Literature. This meant that we pupils heard about metaphor in two connections. The Language teacher mentioned it, but mainly as part of an exercise in which we had to learn a long list of difficult names – like synecdoche or aposiopesis – which referred, we were told, to ‘the figures of speech’. Success in the exercise consisted in mastering one-line definitions of each name and arming oneself with a couple of examples of each of the figures. In the Literature classes these laboriously earned distinctions were largely ignored. Here the point was to forage among poets and novelists for figures of speech, without much regard for their names, and to pass some sort of judgement on them, like ‘vivid’ or ‘mixed’.

In hindsight at least it is not difficult to say what was dissatisfying in these treatments of metaphor. For one thing, a pupil would never have gauged that even the most prosaic of cookery books or the driest of scientific texts was likely to be sprinkled with metaphors on every page. The impression given was that metaphor and its relatives were confined to the province of *belles-lettres*. Further there was no attempt to confer, alongside the rote ability to distinguish among the

seemingly countless figures of speech, any more general understanding of what united these. How, except in obviously question-begging terms, would one distinguish the realm of the figurative in general? This question was never addressed. Finally, no sense was conveyed of how puzzling a phenomenon metaphorical language is. It was both mistaken and unhelpful to be told that people only use it 'for the sake of effect'. Mistaken, because this is not why ordinary speakers, in their mundane moments, employ metaphor. Unhelpful, since it remained a puzzle how writing down sentences which, taken at face value, are not only blatantly false but are known to be by everyone concerned, could be at all 'effective'.

Perhaps as a result of the disappointing way in which it was treated at school, I lost my interest in metaphor – though not, of course, in particular metaphors which I heard or read. When, at university and after, I began to consider general, philosophical questions about the nature of language, I followed the usual practice of the time and either ignored metaphor or relegated it to a mental footnote. Surely it was not a phenomenon which should get in the way of answering those general questions. At worst, it would call for a short appendix.

My interest was revived by reading two authors whose names are not among the first which most people associate with the topic – Nietzsche and Pascal. What distinguished them from others whom I had read on the subject was the tremendous seriousness with which they took metaphor as a vital ingredient of language. Nietzsche took it so seriously as to think that metaphor is the basic principle of language and that so-called literal talk is a kind of frozen sediment of metaphor. I shall be looking at this thought in Section (D) of Chapter 4. Pascal took it seriously for very different reasons. If Nietzsche is an appropriate person to end the book on, Pascal is a useful one with whom to begin it – for not only does he have a striking way of firing or re-firing an interest in the subject, but some of the themes he sounds are crucial to any philosophical reflection on metaphor.

A recurrent and insistent question in the *Pensées* concerns the figurative language of the Bible. Why are these writings,

especially those of the Prophets, so charged with figure? Pascal has, of course, first to satisfy himself that references to 'The King of the Jews', to the Jews 'destroying their enemies', and so on, really are figurative, and not political or military. He does this on a number of grounds. If the language is not figurative, the prophecies would not be worthy of God, and it would, to boot, contain a mass of 'glaring and gross contradiction'.¹ Still, there can be no certainty that the language is figurative without an explanation of why it needs to be. After all, God and his Prophets are surely able to put in 'straight' terms whatever can be said 'straight'; so is it not a blemish that they choose to speak indirectly, opaquely, even deviously? God, it seems, stands condemned if the relevant passages from the Old Testament are literal – but condemned again if they are not.

Pascal offers several arguments, some of them ingenious, why God needs to convey the Word figuratively. First, the prophecy that the Jews would reject Christ could not have been fulfilled 'if the manner of the Messiah had been clearly foretold' in unmistakable, literal terms. Second, the Jews were so 'carnal' a people as to have been 'incapable of taking . . . to their hearts' the unadulterated spiritual message of the Prophets. They would, for example, have 'lacked the zeal to preserve their books and ceremonies' if the prediction that they would one day overcome their passions had not been disguised as the news that they would one day overcome the Babylonians. The Old Testament, Pascal tells us, is a 'cipher' which is read rightly by the good and just, but wrongly by the 'concupiscent' so that they, in their ignorance, may nevertheless further God's purpose. Third, people are anyway 'fond of symbols' and, often, 'the letter kills'. Finally, certain figures are necessary because some of 'the things of God are inexpressible, they cannot be said in any other way'.²

I do not know what standing among theologians Pascal's solutions to the puzzle of the Bible's figurative language enjoy, but his importance for the topic of metaphor does not reside in his response to this particular puzzle. Nor did he confine his thoughts on the topic to the language of the Bible. Witness his

¹ *Pensées* (Penguin, 1980), p. 204.

² *Pensées*, *op. cit.*, pp. 105, 205, 206, 205, and 113 respectively.

very modern claim that, in an age when sheer power is incapable of imposing obedience to authority, figurative talk can help strengthen those 'bonds of imagination' which are required for 'securing respect for a particular person'.³ There are several reasons why we should read Pascal. To begin with, he was – and remained – one of the first writers to appreciate difficulties in identifying figurative talk and to have proposed some general tests for doing so. Thus the fact that an utterance is a 'glaring and gross contradiction' is, *prima facie*, a sign that it is not literal. Second, he remains, like Hegel, one of the very few writers to have tackled the question of why people talk metaphorically at all. Certainly he regarded an answer like 'Because they enjoy it' as insufficient. To use one of his own analogies, figurative talk is as bizarre on the surface as the practice of putting in false windows for the sake of symmetry.⁴ Metaphor, he recognizes, is something that should not occur, or should occur much more rarely than it does, on usual accounts of the nature and purposes of communication. More important even than this appreciation of the need for criteria of figurative language, and his concern with why people engage in it, is the way in which Pascal relates these two. For he is almost unique in holding that identification of non-literal talk requires, in the final analysis, an understanding of why it is engaged in, of its role and function. Here, I believe, Pascal was wiser than the many recent philosophers who insist that the criterial question is independent of, and prior to, questions about the why's and wherefore's of metaphor.

A final reason why it is instructive to read Pascal is that his thoughts on metaphor nicely encapsulate some of the perennial tensions in reflections on this subject. For example, he tells us that the figures of the Bible are 'ciphers' and that 'a cipher has two meanings', literal and figurative.⁵ Since the latter meaning is grasped by the 'righteous', it cannot be ineffable. But he also tells us that figures are necessary when 'the things of God are inexpressible'. Here the tension is between the idea of metaphors as 'decodable' into literal sentences and the idea

³ *ibid.*, pp. 277–8.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 221.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 107.

that translation from the metaphorical to the literal is not generally possible. Pascal himself does not seem to notice the tension, but championship of one or other idea has been a main feature of most recent writings in the area. A second tension is between what might be labelled 'aesthetic' and 'cognitive' accounts of metaphor's role. He refers to such 'aesthetic' considerations as our fondness for symbols, the deadness of the letter, and the 'imaginative force' of metaphor. But he also talks of metaphor's power to convey truth – 'And the truth was recognized from the figure'⁶ – and of the need to employ it when addressing people too 'carnal' to understand the abstractions of spiritual concepts. There are perhaps ways of reducing this tension, but the opposing emphases on metaphor as a 'cognitive' tool and as an 'aesthetic' device continue to divide writers. They can even divide a single writer in his different moods. With Borges, the emphasis is sometimes on the 'cognitive' necessity of metaphors, as when he writes

The end of this story can only be related in metaphors since it takes place in the kingdom of heaven, where there is no time

– and sometimes on 'their aesthetic value . . . [on] what is magical or marvellous in their content'.⁷ Two recent slogans championing the two tendencies are 'A metaphor is a condensed model' and 'A metaphor is a poem in miniature'.⁸ Pascal, then, is a good stimulant to thinking about metaphor.

(A) Questions of demarcation

The primary philosophical question to ask about metaphor is 'What is it?'. How is the metaphorical to be distinguished from what is not metaphorical? This claim about primacy will not sound especially contentious, and I intend it to be even less contentious than it may sound. To begin with, it is one about primacy and not about importance. Different people, according to interest and taste, will find different questions about

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 277.

⁷ *Labyrinths* (Penguin, 1981), pp. 157–8, and André Malraux's Preface to this book, p. 12.

⁸ Max Black, 'More about metaphor', in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1979) and Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 93f.

metaphor the most important. For instance, some may find the question addressed in my final chapter, about metaphorical truth, the most important. Still, it is fairly clear that a question like that presupposes some sort of answer to the primary question. If you think metaphor is distinguished by possessing a special kind of meaning, this will suggest an answer to the question about truth which will not be available if you do not think this. Second, I do not intend the question 'What is metaphor?' to be contrasted, necessarily, with ones which, at first hearing, might sound independent. In particular, I do not want to rule out of court Pascal's point that identification of metaphor requires, finally, an understanding of why people engage in it. That point, as noted, contradicts the usual view that the identificatory question must be answered before ones of a social or psychological kind are raised⁹ – but I think that view is wrong. If by an 'analytical question' is meant one to which empirical considerations concerning linguistic practices and their functions are irrelevant, then my primary question is not, or not purely, an analytical one. Finally, and relatedly, the question is not to be read in the way that such questions were once wont to be read – as calling for an answer in the form of a crisp definition of 'metaphor'. I doubt that crisp definitions which are not circular are available. We seek an understanding of metaphor which, like our understanding of meaning or of truth, is unlikely to consist in grasping a traditionally-styled definition of a word – a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, say.¹⁰

Before I elaborate on the demarcation problem – as I shall label our primary question – a couple of terminological decisions have to be taken. One concerns the bearers or vehicles of metaphor. As it occurs in 'What is metaphor?', the noun is an abstract, universal term. What are the bearers of metaphor? Where, so to speak, do we find it embodied? Some

⁹ For the usual view, see Max Black, 'Metaphor', in his *Models and Metaphors* (Cornell University Press, 1962) and L.J. Cohen, 'The semantics of metaphor', in *Metaphor and Thought*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ I suppose that in *some* sense of definition, the goal of just about any philosophical enquiry can be described as the provision of a definition. But when the 'definition' in question is something like a Tarski-style truth-definition for a language, the goal has very little to do with what has traditionally been thought of as giving definitions.

would say, in sentences; others, in the uses of sentences on occasions. Can individual words be vehicles of metaphor, and if so, is it the words themselves or uses of them? And what of non-linguistic items? Some people speak of metaphorical concepts; others of the metaphor-bearing 'iconic' objects to which words refer. Can pictures, or pieces of music, or articles of clothing be metaphorical? Some say 'Yes' and some say 'No'. Several of these disputes about the proper vehicles of metaphor are important and will be discussed later. But it would be aggravating if even a preliminary discussion of metaphor had to await adjudication of such disputes. My policy, for the time being, will be a liberal one. As the occasion demands, I shall speak freely of metaphorical sentences and their uses, of metaphorical words and their uses, and of metaphorical concepts, thoughts, pictures, or whatever. It may well be that one of these bearers is logically primitive, but this need not mean that reference to the others as metaphorical would be mistaken. For it would not be unreasonable to assume that reference to these could be translated into the idiom of the primitive reference. For example, if sentences are the primitive bearers then a metaphorical utterance will, presumably, be an utterance of a metaphorical sentence. And a metaphorical concept will be one, roughly, which receives linguistic expression in certain metaphorical sentences.¹¹

We also need to select two terms: one to refer to the wider class to which metaphor belongs, the one my teachers called 'figures of speech', and a second to refer to what is outside this class. I prefer 'non-literal' and 'literal' for these two jobs. There are dangers in the choice of this pair, as there are in the choice of any alternative pair. For the moment, I shall mention, in order to avert, just one of these dangers. The distinction between literal and non-literal is not to be equated, *ab initio* at least, with a distinction between two kinds of meaning. Sometimes I speak literally, sometimes not. That is certain. But it is not certain that, in so doing, I first utter words with their literal meanings and then utter words with some alleged non-

¹¹ My use of 'vehicle' in this paragraph should not be confused with the special sense given it by I.A. Richards in his famous distinction between the 'tenor' and 'vehicle' of a metaphor. See below, p. 59. Richards' account can be found in his *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 96ff.

literal meanings. If that *is* what I am doing, it is not something that should be prejudged at this stage.

The need for the terms 'non-literal' and 'literal' suggests that the demarcation problem devolves into two. To ask how the metaphorical is distinguished is to ask, first, how it is distinguished from its non-literal relatives, like metonymy, irony, and synecdoche. And it is to ask, second, how along with these relatives it is to be distinguished from the literal. We might call these the 'internal' and 'external' demarcation problems respectively. Each problem embraces in turn a number of more particular ones. I shall give some examples so that we may get the flavour of the complexity of the demarcation question.

Here, to start with, are three *loci* of the 'internal' question:

(a) 'Washington is angry with the Kremlin'.

Traditional rhetoric would tell us that this is an example, not of metaphor, but of metonymy or perhaps synecdoche. The reason would be that using a place-name to refer to a Government is not 'based' on similarity between two things, but on some other relation, like spatial contiguity. Others would reply that this talk of similarity and contiguity is much too slippery to ground a real distinction and that the crucial thing – which justifies us in speaking of metaphor here – is that the place-name is not being used in its literal sense.

(b) 'What a beauty!', said of Quasimodo.

Some people would maintain that 'beauty' is being used in a non-literal, metaphorical way here. Others would reply that 'beauty' occurs with its usual meaning and that irony needs to be distinguished from metaphor for just that reason. Irony, they will say, resides in the nature of the speech-act performed, not in some abnormal meaning it possesses.

(c) 'Truly 10,000 good deeds has Ulysses wrought'.

Aristotle gives this as an example of one of his four kinds of metaphor, the kind in which a 'species' term ('10,000') is substituted for a 'genus' term ('many').¹² Later writers objected

¹² *De Poetica*, Works X1 (Oxford University Press, 1952), 1457b.

that, not only did Aristotle set a bad precedent by including so much under the heading of 'metaphor', but that it is difficult to fit the example under his own definition of the word – 'giving a thing a name that belongs to something else'. Moreover, judged by such considerations as substitution through resemblance – 10,000 deeds hardly *resemble* many deeds – and shift in meaning, hyperbole surely deserves to be kept distinct from metaphor.

In these cases, the question is whether utterances which are agreed to be of certain non-literal types (metonymical *etc.*) can also be classified as metaphorical. What should the scope of 'metaphor' be within the domain of the non-literal?

In the following examples, instantiating the 'external' demarcation problem, the question is, rather, whether they exemplify the non-literal at all. If they do, then presumably they are metaphorical – but do they?

(d) 'My husband is a pig'.

Since a husband cannot literally be a pig, many would say, this is a clear case of metaphor. To this, others would reply that by now 'pig' has become ambiguous, having as one of its proper meanings something like 'greedy person'. In this sense, the woman's husband may literally be a pig. This is an example of 'dead metaphor', and dead metaphors are no longer real metaphors.

(e) 'He was eating at (around, up to) 9 p.m.'.

Quirk and Greenbaum say that, since these prepositions were originally spatial and are only derivatively temporal, their occurrence in a sentence like this is transferred and therefore metaphorical.¹³ Critics would reply that such diachronic considerations are irrelevant and that, today at least, the temporal use is perfectly literal.

(f) 'That's a lion', said of a lioness.

'Lion', many would agree, is not ambiguous simply because it refers sometimes to the males of the species and sometimes to

¹³ *A University Grammar of English* (Longman, 1973), p. 153.

all members of it. Some want to conclude that, when applied to females, it is used in a transferred, metaphorical way. Roman Jakobson has replied that 'lion' has a 'marked' (+MALE) and an 'unmarked' use, and that the latter needs to be distinguished from a metaphorical use.¹⁴

A final group of examples is of special interest in that people disagree as to whether they illustrate 'internal' or 'external' demarcation problems. That is: people who think the following sentences or sequences of words are not metaphorical divide into two camps – those who think they are literal, and those who think they belong to some other non-literal kind.

(g) 'Those (well-worn) chairs were . . . like so many clean-shaven port-drinkers'. (Henry Green)

Several writers, including Aristotle, think that the distinction between metaphors and similes can be comfortably erased. Others deny this, holding that similes are distinct figures – distinct because their 'logic' is different from that of metaphors, and figurative since the comparisons they make are not seriously intended. Others think that similes are straightforwardly literal utterances. That the comparisons are not serious is neither here nor there.

(h) 'She has a running nose'.

Since noses do not have legs, this must be a metaphor – according to some. Two objections to this claim are (1) 'running nose' is an idiom and therefore of a distinct non-literal kind, and (2) it is an idiom and therefore purely literal. What distinguishes an idiom, according to proponents of (2), is not that it has non-literal meaning, but that its meaning is not a function of the meanings of its components. In the jargon, an idiom is an 'indivisible semantic item'.

(i) 'An old pond
A frog jumps in –
Sound of water' (Bashō)

Japanese aficionados of *haiku* poetry often describe verses like

¹⁴ 'Zur Struktur des russischen Verbums', in his *Selected Writings II* (Mouton, 1971).