METAPHOR AND WHAT IS THE CASE

CHARLES J. HARRIMAN

Sometimes literal-mindedness may be a saving grace. One of Joseph Conrad's stories tells of a captain who saves his ship because he lacks the imagination to be intimidated by a typhoon. When his first mate remarks on the ominous closeness of the weather, complaining that he feels exactly as if he had his head tied up in a woolen blanket, the Captain can only ask in amazement, "D'ye mean to say, Mr. Jukes, you ever had your head tied up in a blanket? What was that for?" Captain MacWhirr has no use for metaphor. His character takes for granted a referential theory of language, and the belief that meanings remain fixed. The Captain's literalness causes him to sail his ship into, and safely out of, a raging natural disaster. The more metaphorical Mr. Jukes is overwhelmed by the immensity of the storm.

On the basis of the introduction, you might suppose that the theme to be developed is anti-metaphorical. After all, if a tendency to figurative language is coincidental with weakness of character, it would be perverse to encourage a respectful attitude toward metaphor. But this would be to miss the point of the story. The Captain interprets his experience in a literal way. As a result he does not understand what he is doing, or has done. The more imaginative First Mate understands all too well. It is the implicit connection between metaphor and understanding that is of most interest here. The theme of the following essay is that metaphor is the key to the cognitive process. If this hypothesis is correct, then by examining the nature and use of metaphor, we should be able to give an account of the cognitive process itself.

In book Theta of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle struggles to define actuality and potentiality, two basic concepts in explanation of what is real. He finds that no adequate definition of the concepts is possible. The meaning of "potential" and "actual" cannot be presented directly, Somewhat apologetically Aristotle turns to induction and analogy to convey the concepts.

> Our meaning can be seen in the particular cases by induction, and we must not seek a definition of everything but be content to grasp the analogy, that it is that which is building to that which is capable of building, and the waking to the sleeping, and that which is seeing to that which has its eyes shut but has sight, and that which has been shaped out of matter to the matter, and that which has been wrought up to the unwrought. Let actuality be defined by one member of this anthesis and the potential by the other. (1048b)

We might suppose that actuality would be more directly accessible, but even here direct definition fails. Aristotle continues, saying: "All things

are not said in the *same* sense to exist actually, but only by analogy—as *A* is in *B* or to *B*, *C* is in *D* or to *D*; for some are as movement to potency and others are as substance to some sort of matter."

Notice the complexity of these analogies. The potential is to the actual, not simply as that which is building is to that which is capable of building or the sleeping to the waking, but as both these cases taken together, along with an indefinite number of other cases.

The analogy proceeds simultaneously on two levels: the relation of an unspecified number of particular instances, which provide the material for an inductive generalization, and the relation of the resultant of those instances to the principles of actuality and potentiality somehow implicit in them.

At the first level we are given in a way of recognizing other individual instances according to the examples provided. At the second level, all such instances taken together define an abstract relation not identical with the instances.

The interesting problem is not the ontological status of the universals, potentiality and actuality, but the way in which directions are provided for the use of those terms, and the nature of the relation to which they are supposed to correspond. The technique which Aristotle describes is obviously comparative. Instances of actual-potential relations are established by comparison with the specific examples provided by Aristotle. All such instances, taken collectively, are compared to establish the abstract rule for potentiality and actuality. The comparisons form a proportional analogy: All individual cases of actuality are to all individual cases of potentiality as the actual is to the potential.

This double comparative relation is further complicated by Aristotle's observation that "actual" is not univocal, but is to be predicated of things analogically. The step-by-step procedure then involves recognition of particular cases of actual and potential, the comparison of these cases in order to arrive at the general principles, and the recognition that the word actual is itself predicated only analogically of the individual cases which it subsumes. Since the terms are correlative, similar observations may be made concerning the use of "potential."

Where self-evident principles are lacking and deduction fails, Aristotle is not slow to employ the indirect techniques of induction and analogy. Analogy and metaphor are closely connected in Aristotle's thought. In the *Rhetoric* he describes metaphor as consisting of a comparison of elements either genus to species, species to genus, species to species, or by way of analogy of the form *A*:*B*: :*C*:*D*. In the *Poetics*, he says that the capacity to use metaphor, which involves the capacity to perceive analogical relations of this kind, is the mark of genius. It is a natural talent, not one that can be learned.

Since Aristotle's time the importance of analogy and metaphor to a comprehensive account of reality has been acknowledged again and again. St. Thomas writes at length about the analogies of being. Like Aristotle, he regards analogy as the technique by which the otherwise inaccessible aspects of reality, in this case the nature of God, may be incorporated into the organized body of knowledge.

Kant also makes specific use of analogy to help explain how the categories of understanding are applied to appearances. According to Kant:

> In philosophy analogies signify something very different from what they represent in mathematics. In the latter they are formulas which express the equality of two quantitative relations, and are always constitutive; so that if three members of the proportion are given, the fourth is likewise given, that is, can be constructed. But in philosophy the analogy is not the equality of two *quantitative* but of two *qualitative* relations; and from three given members we can obtain *a priori* knowledge only of the relation to a fourth, not of the fourth member itself. The relation yields, however, a rule for seeking the fourth member in experience, and a mark whereby it can be detected. An analogy of experience is, therefore, only a rule according to which a unity of experience may arise from perception. (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Norman Kemp Smith, trans. p. 211.)

The view of metaphor which we adopt here combines elements of both the Aristotelian and Kantian accounts. But it goes considerably beyond both Aristotle and Kant by rejecting the referential theory of meaning which they both take for granted. Before outlining just what is meant by a non-referential theory of meaning, a more detailed account of metaphor is in order.

Metaphor will be said to occur when an expression appears in unusual circumstances, and the context indicates that its use is deliberate. An expression, deliberately used in an unusual way, is problematic. Such an expression may be said to invite interpretation.

The simplest form of metaphor is the substitution of one term for another. Substitutions may follow the pattern described by Aristotle: species for genus, genus for species, or species for species, or they may be of the kind called "metonymy"—in which the name of some closely related thing or quality is substituted for the name of the thing itself, or the substitution may be of the kind called synecdoche—in which the name of a part is substituted for the name of the whole, or the whole for the part.

The distinguishing characteristic of the substitution metaphor is the presence of only two terms: the customary, or literal, one, and the unusual one that is substituted for it. Some perfectly good ordinary term is omitted, and another, strange to the context, is put in its place. The substitution is supposed to be transparent, requiring minimal interpretation, usually according to some such standard scheme as one of those just described. Such substitutions are valuable chiefly as an easy means of

avoiding awkward repetition, or as a kind of rhetorical decoration.

Sometimes metaphor is said to consist of implied comparison. Instead of saying that *X* is like *Y*, *X* is said to be *Y*. Thus, "The man is a fox," is supposed to be an elliptical form of the simile, "The man is like a fox." Metaphors do involve comparison, but they are not all reducible to similes. Like the substitution theory, the elliptical simile theory of metaphor is useful in interpreting only the simplest kinds of metaphors.

Metaphors of Aristotle's fourth type, those based on analogy, are by far the most interesting. However Kant's description of analogical structure is more helpful than Aristotle's. According to the passage from the first Critique already quoted, Kant finds that the analogical form in language provides in its first three elements a rule for determining the fourth element. The structure that Kant describes is closer to Aristotle's own practice, as revealed in the case of actuality and potentiality examined earlier, than is Aristotle's own explanation. Aristotle grants that potentiality is indefinable, and then asserts that by using induction and comparing particular cases of the actual and the potential, it is possible to construct by analogy, a rule that will determine the potential in any given case.

By employing metaphor as a technique for dealing with an aspect of experience previously outside the scope of discourse, Aristotle goes well beyond the limits represented by his own example of analogical metaphor in the *Rhetoric*. In the *Rhetoric* he treats analogy as a more complicated kind of substitution: Because the cup is to Dionysius as the shield is to Ares, we can interchange "shield" and "cup," and speak metaphorically of the "cup" of Ares. (Rhetoric III.x.7). This is a much more conservative procedure than Aristotle adopts in the case of actuality and potentiality. All four elements are already given in the language, and the proportion is simply another substitution technique. Rather than providing a rule for seeking an unspecified fourth element, as Kant maintains, this technique substitutes one specific term for another. When faced with the problem of expanding the limits of discourse, Aristotle followed the Kantian method rather than the procedure he describes in the *Rhetoric*.

What Kant describes as a rule might also be called the "interval," or "step," the relation that is defined by the terms of the proportion, but is not one of the terms. Knowing what the interval is, or what step to take, makes it possible to develop new concepts within the language, and to designate things previously undesignated. Metaphor, then, is an important innovative technique in the development of language.

Indeed, some scholars have maintained that all language originates in metaphor. Max Muller was an early advocate of such a view. According to Muller, language is inherently ambiguous. The ambiguity of the language permits the "transferring of a name from the object to which it properly

belongs to other objects which strike the mind as in some way or other participating in the peculiarities of the first object."[1] He supposes that there was "a period in the history of our race when all the thoughts that went beyond the narrow horizon of everyday life had to be expressed by means of metaphor. . . ."[2] Words transformed in this way were not regarded as metaphor. Rather something in their original use carried over to the new use, and was regarded as part of the new circumstances. The result was myth. Only when man became conscious of his language was its metaphorical character recognized. Even so, Muller believed that we are still taken in by our language, and that we have to be constantly on our guard against our tendency to reify metaphorical expressions.

Although Ernst Cassirer vehemently disagrees with Muller's explanation of the nature myth, he also holds that metaphor is essential to the development of language. According to Cassirer, the metaphorical processes are not the result of ambiguity that allows a word to be applied to already existing concepts taken as similar in some respect. Rather it is the basic mental process by which both language and myth develop. In the process of naming a new experience, some aspect is selected as significant because of the previous experience and momentary interest of the names. An existing term is applied in circumstances which "objectively" may be quite foreign to its origin.

> The aspects of Being are distinguished and coordinated according to a measure supplied by action hence they are guided, not by any "objective" similarity among things, but by their appearances through the medium of practise, which relates within a purposive nexus.[3]

Crudely put, things are not designated by a single expression because they are similar, they are taken as similar because they are designated by a single expression.[4] The use of a single expression to designate diverse experiences is the outgrowth of the orientation and thrust of the culture in which the language develops.

This account of the metaphorical origins of language anticipates in important ways the views of the later Wittgenstein regarding language as an expression of a form of life. It also parallels in an interesting fashion the theory of predicate projection developed by Nelson Goodman in his *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast.*

Wittgenstein in the Investigations insists that to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life. The way we talk about the world is an expression of the way we determine the world to be: "It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life."[5]

In a similar vein, Nelson Goodman maintains that our use of a term is dictated, not by induction from what is the case in the world, but by habit

of our language. "In the case of our main stock of well-worn predicates," says Goodman, "I submit that the judgment of projectibility has derived from the habitual projection, rather than the habitual projection from the judgment of projectibility. The reason why only the right predicated happen so luckily to have become well-entrenched is that the well-entrenched predicates have thereby become the right ones."[6]

Cassirer sees this process of projection as essentially metaphorical. Myth and Language share metaphorical origins.

> In the light of this basic principle of mythic metaphor [i.e., the identification of disparate entities,] we can grasp . . . what is commonly called the metaphorical function of language. . . . This function does not constitute any *part* of speech, but it governs and characterizes all human talk. . . . If metaphor is taken in this general sense, it is not just a development of speech, but must be regarded as one of its essential conditions. . . .[7]

The position which is outlined in the preceding passages may be described as one that finds thought and language virtually indistinguishable. Metaphor is the process by which both thought and language develop. The full metaphorical process involves the construction of a proportional analogy which presents a "rule" for the "projection of a predicate." That is, the metaphor indicates by comparison, or by presenting relations, how a term may be used in a new way.

A similar account of the metaphorical process has been developed by Winifred Nowottny. She maintains that "a metaphor is a set of directions for supplying the sense of an unwritten literal term."[8] Taking the expression "the ship plows the waves," as a metaphor, Nowottny finds it "tantamount to saying 'the action of a ship in the waves is like the action of a plow in the soil,' or 'the ship goes through the waves; the plow goes through the soil; the two actions are in one or more respects the same,' or, 'the ship is to the waves as the plow is to the soil.' "[9]

According to her account:

> In a metaphor, the usual syntactical frame of a sentence is at some point filled up with a figurative word or phrase. The resulting impression must be complex, since two sentences are implied. The sentence "the ship ploughs the waves" implies *The ship does something to the waves* and *The plow plows the soil*. . . . These implicit or unwritten sentences function simultaneously to provide a parallel action or reflected image.[10]

Nowottny offers more sophisticated examples which are too long to quote here. She is careful to point out that interpretation of this kind "directs us to the sense, not the exact term. . . . The reader pieces out metaphor by something supplied or constructed from his own experience, according to the specification given linguistically by the utterance in which the metaphor occurs."[11]

The focus of our discussion has moved from the interpretation of experience in language to the interpretation of language. We began by

considering how analogical techniques may be used to organize our environment or, at least, the way we talk about our environment and moved, not too subtly, to a discussion of the processes by which unusual expressions may be interpreted so that they fit into our experience. The shift might be justified by saying that it is the result of looking at the same processes from different directions: moving from experience to language in the first case, and from language back to experience in the second.

In part this is correct, but it by-passes an interesting consequence of any theory that takes metaphor as the basic process of thought and language. If the process of understanding is fundamentally metaphorical, the nature of meaning must be non-referential. Cassirer emphasizes this point when he insists that it is the symbolic forms in which we cast our experience that determines the nature of that experience. Although he grants that language begins with naming, words are not simply signs for things.

> To give a name to an object or action is to subsume it under a certain class concept. If this subsumption were once and for all prescribed by the nature of things it would be unique and uniform. Yet the names that occur in human speech cannot be interpreted in any such invariable manner. They are not designed to refer to substantial things, independent entities which exist by themselves. They are determined rather by human interests and human purposes. But these interests are not fixed and invariable. Nor are the classifications to be found in human speech made at random; they are based on certain constant and recurring elements in our sense experience. Without such recurrences there would be no foothold, no point of support, for our linguistic concepts. But the combination or separation of perceptual data depends upon the free choice of a frame of reference. There is no rigid and pre-established scheme according to which our divisions and subdivisions might once and for all be made. . . . The name of an object lays no claim upon its nature. . . . For in the act of denomination we select, out of the multiplicity and diffusion of our sense data, certain fixed centers of perception.[12]

We have already noted that Nelson Goodman and the later Wittgenstein adopt views of language that are essentially non-referential. Language, of course, may be used to refer, but the significance of an expression arises not from the object or objects to which it may be used to make reference, but from the place it occupies in the language system of which it is a part.

The development of new words may be by stipulation, or it may be done metaphorically. The latter technique is the one that produces cognitive as well as linguistic innovation. As Douglas Berggren has pointed out, creative thought in the arts, in philosophy, and in science is "inescapably metaphorical."[13] Although Berggren retains a referential theory of meaning, his contention that science and philosophy as well as the arts proceed metaphorically is undoubtedly correct.

One final observation with regard to the character of metaphor: If Nowottny's account is correct, metaphor may be regarded as a self-referential process. A metaphor, because of its structure, implicitly

presents the directions for its own interpretation. The second expression in Nowottny's analysis of metaphor is derived from the "metaphorical" use of a certain term. In the preceding example the term was "plowed." To borrow the terminology that Nelson Goodman develops in his later work on *The Languages of Art*,[14] the use of the word "plowed" in this way indicates that a certain "schemata" or set of "labels" is to be transferred to another "realm." The second sentence, "The plow goes through the soil," indicates the realm in which the appropriate schemata is to be sought. The linguistic moves that are made in that realm are the key to the moves to be made in the new realm. That is, the ways in which the labels are used in one schemata indicate the ways the labels are to be used in the other.

Metaphor, then is a self-directing device in the program of our language. It presents new material along with an indication of the already established procedures for its interpretation.

The implications of this view of metaphor are far too many to be explored here, but in conclusion I would like to present one consequence dogmatically. If metaphor is the basic principle of the cognitive process, those who create metaphors for metaphors' sake, that is to say, the poets and the artists among us, expand the possibilities of knowledge no less than those who may be concerned with metaphors for specific purposes. It follows that a proper epistemology should be concerned with art no less than with science.

NOTES

[1] Max Muller, Lecture VII "Metaphor" in *Lectures on the Science of Language*, Second Series (New York: Charles Scribner and Co., 1887), p. 369. Quoted in Warren A. Shibles, *Analysis of Metaphor in the Light of W. M. Urban's Theories* (The Haguc: Mouton, 1971), p. 127.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne K. Langer (New York: Dover Publications, 1946), p. 95.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), Sec. 241.

[6] Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc.), p. 98.

[7] Cassirer, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

[8] Winifred Nowottny, *The Language Poets Use* (London: Athlone Press, 1962), p. 59.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 59-60.

[12] Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), pp. 148-9.

[13] Douglass Berggren, "The Use and Abuse of Metaphor," *The Review of Metaphysics*, XVI (1962), p. 238.

[14] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1968), p. 72.

College of Santa Fe