METAPHOR: SOME DICTIONARY FACTS AND WHAT THEY IMPLY

Houghton Dalrymple

In this paper I try to do two things—to say what a metaphor is and to show that philosophers have been confused about what it is they are asking when they ask what a metaphor is. Since my answer to the question about the meaning of "metaphor" contains little new, my main excuse for writing this paper is to clarify the meaning of the question, "What is a metaphor?". I believe, however, that if the meaning of the question can be made more clear, the answer to the question will appear to be less of a problem than it has appeared to be in the past.

When a child asks, "Mother, what is a robin?", he expects to be told what the word "robin" means, how he would go about recognizing or identifying a robin. Philosophers too ask what "X" is, that is, what "X" means, and provide answers that explain, or try to explain, how "X" is used. This has puzzled some people, for the questions are usually asked about words that everybody knows perfectly well how to use. There is something odd in the picture of a philosopher presuming to tell a man-on-the-street what the man means when he says "X"—particularly if "X" is a simple and commonplace expression. G. E. Moore has gone a long way toward removing this oddity. It is one thing, Moore says, to know the meaning of an expression and quite another thing to be able to analyze the meaning of the expression. Moore is right, of course, and English philosophers following Moore have done much in the way of elucidating the uses of such terms as "if...then", "can", "true", "know", and "free". Nearly all of these words are non-technical words, frequently appearing in ordinary speech, and varying in meaning according to the contexts in which they appear. More than anything else, it is this extreme variability in meaning that has made the philosophic task so interesting and challenging. On the other hand, technical words are contextually independent to a large degree, and because they have been consciously introduced into language by specialists, these words have just the meanings that have been assigned to them by the specialists. Furthermore, since the terms are introduced into the language by means of rules that will govern the uses of the terms, the specialist can be expected not only to know the meaning of the terms, but to be able to analyze their meanings as well. So if a non-specialist wants to know what the meaning of one of these terms is, he should either ask one of the specialists or look it up in a technical dictionary. Ordinary language philosophers have wisely refrained from attempting to analyze the meanings of technical terms. It is quite obvious in the philosophy of literature.

"Metaphor" is, I believe, a technical word, or at least a semi-technical word. There is obviously a continuum here. The word, at any rate, appears infrequently in ordinary speech; its principal users are

literary critics. Although literary criticism is not a science, it is regarded as a discipline, and if it at all deserves that name, the literary critic should be expected to know both the meanings and the definitions of the words that appear in the technical vocabulary, such as "metaphor", "simile", and "oxymoron". So if a philosopher wants to know what one of these terms means, he should ask a literary critic, or else look it up in a dictionary where he can find an empirical report of what literary critics mean by the term. Philosophers of literature, apparently wanting to know what metaphor is, have not done this, which strikes me as a little odd. Of course, I may be mistaken in my assumption that in asking what metaphor is they are asking for the intension of the term. They may be asking instead for the extension of the term; that is, they may be asking the same kind of question that the child is asking when he wants to know what a robin is. But this would be stranger still, because if this were so, there would be nothing to study or argue about. In fact, their situation would be comparable to a group of ornithologists conducting an investigation to find out what birds are.

Asking what metaphor is may seem such a waste of effort as to cast into doubt the assumption that philosophers are even asking the question. And indeed, it is a general impression that is hard to pin down by selected quotations. However, the following quotation is explicit: "Of all the questions about metaphor that interest the literary theorist or philosophical aesthetician, the foremost—that is, first and fundamental one—is, of course: what is it?".

The belief that the question "What is metaphor?" is weighty and difficult may result from attempts to provide an ontological answer for a conceptual question. Depending as it does upon the distinction between essential and non-essential attributes, which is a matter of degree, the conceptual-ontological distinction is not sharp. Nevertheless, the distinction can often be made, and should always be kept in mind. The danger of confusion in the matter before us is especially high. The study of metaphor is a linguistic study and so is the study of the meaning of "metaphor". Still, there is a wide difference.

My procedure in what follows involves two steps. First, I list what several dictionaries have had to say about the meaning of "metaphor", and second, I list a number of expressions which the definitions seem to fit, more or less well. The examples come from two sources—language that is literary (or has some pretensions to being literary) and vernacular speech, especially slang. Since it is not possible to call on the literary critics, I ask the readers to decide for themselves whether the examples are metaphors. Most of the examples are, in my opinion, clear cases, but I have not tried to exclude the doubtful or the borderline. Looking at the definitions first, it can be seen that there is something of a consensus.

Dictionary Definitions of Metaphor

1. The Reader's Encyclopedia. In figurative language, an implied comparison identifying the two things compared with each other. As distinguished from simile, in which the comparison is stated, metaphor

pretends that the two things compared are identical.

2. Fowler's Dictionary of English Usage. A metaphor is a tacit comparison made by the substitution of the compared notion for the one to be illustrated...every metaphor presupposes a simile, and every simile is compressible or convertible into a metaphor.

3. Columbia Encyclopedia. A figure of speech in which one class of things is referred to as if it belonged to another class. Whereas simile states that A is like B, a metaphor states that A is B or substitutes B for A.

4. O.E.D. The figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that which it is properly applicable.

5. The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary. A figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable, in order to suggest a resemblance.

6. The Technique of Composition. Metaphor is a figure of speech that implies but does not state a comparison. Instead of making an actual comparison between two objects or ideas, metaphor directly applies to one object a term which is ordinarily associated with another object, but which has some quality or aspect appropriate to the first.

The consensus that was mentioned earlier is apparent in these definitions. Fowler alone excepted, every definition either explicitly or strongly implies three features of metaphor—figure of speech, implicit comparison and a resemblance between the objects compared by virtue of which the comparison is made. Fowler does not mention that metaphor is a figure of speech, but he must have supposed that his readers already knew that. As for the O.E.D., some digging is required, but the term "analogous to" is used, which implies resemblance among differences, and resemblance could scarcely be noted except by comparison of objects. This consensus that has been revealed is simply what is called the Comparison Theory of Metaphor. How surprising it is that the theory, if it can be called that, has not been universally accepted. What are the nature of the objections that are raised by philosophers, such as Beardsley? Are they denying that this is what "metaphor" means? Or are they making proposals for linguistic change? If so, arguments for linguistic change should be presented, though they seldom are. Are they perhaps denying that there are metaphors in the sense explained? If there are metaphors in this sense, there is no a priori reason why the term "metaphor" should not be used to refer to them.

It would be advisable now to consider some metaphors.

1. That time of year thou mayst in me behold
   Where yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
   Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
   Bare ruined choirs, where once the sweet birds
   sang.

2. Truth forever on the scaffold
   Wrong forever on the throne.
3. Juliet is the sun.
4. God is dead.
5. The look in his eyes was a mute cry for help.
6. The sun was spiteful yesterday.
7. The sun is not spiteful today.
8. Charles is a (sly) fox (used metaphorically).
9. Charles is not a (sly) fox (used metaphorically).
10. Charles is an (a wise) owl (used metaphorically).
11. That the judge let the youth go unpunished was a cruel kindness.
12. And where you are is where you are not.
13. Charles is a clown (used metaphorically).
14. After a vacation, it is tough to have to go back to the salt mines.
15. (The wise thing to do is to) Make hay while the sun shines.
16. The arm of the chair is broken.
17. One of the legs of the table is broken.

Some facts about metaphors should be noted. First, metaphors may or may not be contradictory or obviously false when construed literally. Beardsley in his Verbal Opposition Theory states otherwise, but he is mistaken. Most metaphors, construed literally, are as a matter of fact false, but they do not have to be. Construed literally, the metaphors numbered one, two, three, four, five, six, eleven and twelve are all either false or at least not true. Likewise for eight and ten if eight and ten are metaphors, which they will be if Charles is a human being. To regard sixteen and seventeen as metaphors, the literal sense of "arm" and "leg" will have to be taken as the sense that applies to animal organisms only. If they are so regarded, then they too will be literally false or at least not literally true. On the other hand, literally speaking, seven, nine, thirteen, fourteen and fifteen are possibly true, or if in some cases not possibly true, then at least not false. If there is logical opposition in a positive metaphor when read literally, it will be impossible for the metaphorical negation to be false. Thus nine, read literally, is a logical truth (if Charles is a human being); seven though perhaps not a logical truth read literally, is at least not false. Thirteen and fourteen could be both literally and metaphorically true, and fifteen is good advice, literally or metaphorically.

Second, metaphor may be used in the performance of any of the speech acts, including the mere saying of something for the purpose of

considering what it is that is said. A frequent function of metaphor is to assert something, but this is not always so, as in "Make hay while the sun shines". If my fourth point seems too obvious to be worth mentioning, let it be said that it has even been denied that it is possible to use metaphor for the purpose of assertion.

Third, good similes make good metaphors and poor similes make poor metaphors. To say of somebody that he is sly as a fox is, of course, a good simile, and when it is, to say of that person that he is a fox (or a sly fox) is a good metaphor. On the other hand, if "Charles is wise as an owl", is bad as a simile, it is even worse as a metaphor. One of the criteria of a good simile is that it works well as an open metaphor "Charles is a fox" is at least as effective as "Charles is a sly fox". But "Charles is an owl", still recognizable as a metaphor, borders on the ludicrous. In general, for a metaphor to be effective it must be widely believed that the object literally referred to really does possess characteristics that are attributed to the object referred to metaphorically.

Fourth, in opposition to Fowler and Richards, dead metaphors, such as sixteen and seventeen, are not metaphors. The reason that both Fowler and Richards assign for referring to dead metaphors as real metaphors is that dead metaphors have a way of coming alive in awkward contexts. I would hold, however, that when a dead metaphor comes alive, it comes alive not as a metaphor but as a pun—when one suddenly remembers the other meaning that the term has. A good reason for not referring to dead metaphors as metaphors is that the procedure would make a metaphor out of practically every general term in the dictionary. Still, I agree with Fowler and Richards that metaphor is omnipresent in language, and not a mere ornamentation of poetry.

The last point is a question that I do not have an answer for, not a statement of fact. Excluding that broad sense of "metaphor" in which all language that is not literal is metaphorical, is every oxymoron a metaphor? Many oxymoron are metaphors, but are they all? Is "And where you are is where you are not" a metaphor? If it means the same as the metaphor, "Your body is here, but your mind is miles away", then it is a metaphor. But I am not sure that the second statement is a translation of the first, nor am I sure that there is any translation of the first statement that would show that it is a metaphor. More generally, I am not sure that every oxymoron is a metaphor.

The Iconic Signification Theory differs from the Comparison Theory only in being more specific about how it is that metaphors work. Paul Henle has given one of the clearest statements of the theory. After first defining a trope as an expression in which "at least one term signifies mediately", he goes on:

> Metaphor, then, is analyzable into a double sort of semantic relationship. First, using symbols in Peirce's sense, directions are given for finding an object or situation. This use of language is quite ordinary. Second it is implied that any object or situation fitting the direction may serve as an icon for what one wishes to describe. The

> icon is never actually present; rather, through the rule, one understands what it must be and, through this understanding, what it signifies.[2]

Susanne Langer has incorporated the theory into her general theory of presentational symbolism. She has this to say: "In a genuine metaphor, an image of the literal meaning is our symbol for the figurative meaning, the thing that has no name of its own. If we say a brook is laughing in the sunlight, an idea of laughter intervenes to symbolize the vivid, spontaneous activity of the brook".[3]

The Iconic Signification Theory that has just been described is obviously nothing new. In fact, it is arguable that the theory goes all the way back to Aristotle.

What the dictionaries say entails the Comparison Theory of Metaphor, and what they say strongly implies the Iconic Signification Theory of Metaphor. There is a consensus among lexicographers, as we have seen, that the term "figure of speech" should be included in the definition of "metaphor". It is instructive to see what the dictionaries report about the meaning of "figure". Here again there is almost unanimity not only in listing a certain definition but in listing that definition at or near the top of the list. I have space only to quote the definitions of the noun and verb forms that are found in The Living Webster. Under the noun form the first definition is "the form of anything as expressed by the outline or contour", and the fourth definition is "a pictorial representation of an object". Under the verb form, after listing computation first, the second definition is "to make a figure or likeness of". The only puzzle in "figure of speech" is what to make out of the "of", but I do not suppose "of" to mean that the figure is actually in the speech; this is unlikely because linguistic symbols in naming rather than illustrating relations constitute poor figures of almost anything. Instead I think the function of the word "of" is that the figure is made by the speech in the sense that something is brought before the mind for its consideration. Unless by some subtle chemistry of words the meaning of the word "figure" takes on a fresh meaning in "figure of speech", the dictionaries are highly supportive of the Iconic Signification Theory of Metaphor.

Of the many objections that have been levied against the Comparison and Iconic Signification theories, I can mention only two. One of these does not rest upon any serious mistake; it is simply a proposal for terminological change, still permitting us to mark off for study what has traditionally been referred to by the term "metaphor". On the other hand, conceptual confusion is manifest in the other objection that I will take up.

Phillip Wheelwright mentions two ways of metaphor, epiphor and diaphor. He says:

> Since the essential work of epiphor--which is to say, metaphor in the conventional Aristotelian sense--is to express a similarity between something relatively well known or concretely known (the semantic vehicle) and

> something which, although of greater worth or importance, is less well known or more obscurely known (the semantic tenor), and since it makes its point by means of words, it follows that an epiphor presupposes a vehicular image or notion that can be readily understood when indicated by a suitable word or phrase.[4]

It will be noticed that Wheelwright is proposing that the new word "epiphor" replace the old word "metaphor". Now I would have preferred for him to have used "metaphor" in the old way, but if he feels he needs "metaphor" to do another job—embracing both epiphor and diaphor—I am inclined to let him have it. There is even a warrant in linguistic custom for doing what Wheelwright does, that is, when the adjective "metaphorical" is placed in front of the noun "language", "metaphorical" becomes practically a synonym for "figurative".

In order for a metaphor to work, or work well, it is necessary to believe that there are properties really possessed by both the figure and what is meant by the figure. Otherwise, the figure could not be used, or used effectively, to illustrate the properties that are being attributed to the object meant. The peculiarity of the objection now to be considered is that it asserts that in many metaphors there are no properties literally possessed by the figure and the object meant. Speaking about the "Juliet is the sun" metaphor, Ted Cohen asserts: There is no property literally possessed by both Juliet and the sun in virtue of which Juliet is said to be like the sun. The property in question, if there is one, is possessed literally by the sun and metaphorically by Juliet".[5] If it is assumed that Romeo and Juliet are real persons, I think that there is a property actually possessed by both Juliet and the sun by which the sun can be taken as a figure for Juliet. If I construe Shakespeare correctly, part of what he is saying is that Juliet and the sun actually possess the dispositional property of lifting Romeo's spirits, or improving his state of mind. But this is not so important as something else. Suppose a person could find no relevant likeness at all between Juliet and the sun. Would he then refer to the passage as a metaphor? If he did, I suspect that it would be merely because he didn't understand the passage, which is an insufficient reason for calling something a metaphor. Cohen seems unaware of the possibility that a person might decide not to call "Juliet is the sun" a metaphor if there is no way to say anything about Juliet by referring to properties of the sun. Cohen seems certain that "Juliet is the sun" is a metaphor, but how does he know? He does not specify a rule for detecting metaphors. Instead he says that "...there is no function for getting the meaning of a metaphor, and there are no simple recognition signs for detecting metaphors". Small wonder that he thinks that "... it is a kind of marvel that we are able to identify metaphors at all, and yet more marvelous that we are able to understand them".[6]

Investigation of dictionaries may seem like a poor way of defining the Comparison and Iconic Signification theories of metaphor, and so it would be if these were real theories in the sense that there are real

theories in physics and the other sciences. These real theories raise questions about what goes on in nature, and the answers cannot be found in dictionaries. In contrast, the Comparative and Iconic Signification theories explain nothing except what the word "metaphor" means. That their explications of the meaning of this technical word is right in line with what the dictionaries say is the strongest point that can be argued in their favor. Moreover, this way of putting the matter brings into sharp focus the elusive questions with which this essay began. What is it that philosophers are asking when they ask "What is a metaphor?"? And when the answers are found, how can they be justified?

NOTES

1. Monroe Beardsley, "The Metaphysical Twist", Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 226 (1962), 293.

2. Paul Henle, "Metaphor", in Language, Thought and Culture, ed. Paul Henle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), p. 178.

3. Susanne Langer, Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art (New York: Mentor Books, 1948), p. 124.

4. Phillip Wheelwright, Metaphor and Reality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962), p. 73.

5. Ted Cohen, "Notes on Metaphor", Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 34 (1976), 257.

6. Ibid., 257.