Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy

Ted Cohen

These are good times for the friends of metaphor. They are *so* salutary that we are in danger of overlooking some very thorny underbrush as we scramble over the high road to figurative glory. Metaphor is a wonderful topic, and its new students are apt to be so enchanted by it that they never learn that the respectable road to its study was blocked until recently. Older students have been quick—perhaps too quick—to suppose that the road has been cleared and that it is the only proper road.

Now that the respectability of metaphor seems to be acknowledged all round, the only serious questions thought open concern how metaphor is to be described: in particular (1) how to understand the relation of "poetic" metaphors to metaphors in ordinary speech and prose (about which Karsten Harries' paper has interesting implications), and (2) how to incorporate an account of metaphor into more general theories of language or meaning (a major ambition of Paul Ricoeur's paper). There are other questions, and to indicate them I will note, very schematically, how we came to these good days.

There has been a very strong line in Western philosophy, especially in that strain running from British empiricism through Vienna positivism, which has denied to metaphors and their study any philosophical seriousness of the first order. Here it is in Hobbes' *Leviathan* (pt. 1, chap. 4):

> The general use of speech, is to transfer our mental discourse into verbal; or the train of our thoughts, into a train of words. . . . Special uses of speech are these; first, to register, what by cogi-

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> tation, we find to be the cause of any thing, present or past; and what we find things present or past may produce, or effect; which in sum, is acquiring of arts. Secondly, to show to others that knowledge which we have attained, which is, to counsel and teach one another. Thirdly, to make known to others our wills and purposes, that we may have the mutual help of one another. Fourthly, to please and delight ourselves and others, by playing with our words, for pleasure or ornament, innocently.
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> To these uses, there are also four correspondent abuses. First, when men register their thoughts wrong, by the inconstancy of the signification of their words; by which they register for their conception, that which they never conceived, and so deceive themselves. Secondly, when they used words metaphorically; that is, in other senses than that they are ordained for; and thereby deceive others.
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> . . . And therefore such [inconstant] names can never be true grounds of any ratiocination. No more can metaphors, and tropes of speech: but these are less dangerous, because they profess their inconstancy; which the other do not.

Far less generous and forgiving is Locke's *Essay* (bk. 3, chap. 10): (Paul de Man will soon be doing an extraordinary reading of Locke, and perhaps you will hear this passage again. It is, however, a good passage to have more than one look at, and I cannot resist reading it out at a conference where Wayne Booth is present.)

> 34. . . . since wit and fancy find easier entertainment in the world than dry truth and real knowledge, figurative speeches and allusion in language will hardly be admitted as an imperfection or abuse of it. I confess, in discourses where we seek rather pleasure and delight than information and improvement, such ornaments as are borrowed from them can scarce pass for faults. But yet if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheats, and, therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or person that makes use of them. What, and how various they are, will be superfluous here to take notice; the books of rhetoric which abound in the

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> world will instruct those who want to be informed: only I cannot but observe how little the preservation and improvement of truth and knowledge is the care and concern of mankind; since the arts of fallacy are endowed and preferred. It is evident how much men love to deceive and be deceived, since rhetoric, that powerful instrument of error and deceit, has its established professors, is publicly taught, and has always been had in great reputation: and, I doubt not, but it will be thought great boldness, if not brutality in me, to have said thus much against it. Eloquence, like the fair sex, has too prevailing beauties in it to suffer itself ever to be spoken against. And it is in vain to find fault with those arts of deceiving wherein men find pleasure to be deceived.

Although these remarks of Hobbes and Locke may seem remote, their import has prevailed until quite recently. The works of many twentieth-century positivist philosophers and others either state or imply that metaphors are frivolous and inessential, if not dangerous and logically perverse, by denying to them (1) any capacity to contain or transmit knowledge; (2) any direct connection with facts; or (3) any genuine meaning. In what seems to me a peripheral consequence of the move away from classical positivism, this opinion about metaphor has been abandoned, and it is becoming common—almost customary—to credit metaphors with all three virtues.

This conversion in the estimate of metaphor is very recent. The pivotal text, I think, is Max Black's "Metaphor."[1] It has been an extremely influential and provocative piece and it continues to hold a central position in contemporary discussions. It is also something of a period piece in what its terminology suggests about its presumed readership. Black, refusing to concede that metaphor's only legitimate capacities are emotive, argues for their "cognitive" status. He is thus, up to a point, arguing the case within the categorical constraints imposed by positivist philosophy of language. There is a tacit acceptance of the idea that metaphors are relatively inconsequential unless they are cognitive, that is, unless they meet this canonical test of respectability.

Black's essay became an important stimulus to the theory of metaphor adopted by Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art.*[2] Goodman very easily credits metaphorical statements with truth values exactly on a par with those possessed by literal statements. Although Goodman does not assign meaning to metaphors,[3] and Black does not explicitly treat them as bearers of truth values, their work, along with that of some others, has created a climate within even the most severely analytical

1. Max Black, "Metaphor," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55 (1954–55): 273–94.

2. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1968).

3. He is equally reluctant to use any customary conception of meaning in his analyses of literal statements.

circles in which metaphors are treated comfortably as if they were thoroughly "descriptive" (of facts), potential vehicles of knowledge, and possessed a special meaning other than that belonging to their literal readings.

A considerable benefit of this new attitude has been the attraction to the topic of metaphor of a number of talented philosophers and linguists who otherwise might not have been interested. And anyone who, like me, values the topic must be pleased to see it come into its own. Metaphor's elevation in status is precipitate, nonetheless, on two counts. The major straightforward reservation ought to be that it has not yet been argued decisively that metaphors have this logically respectable status. The central, fundamental question concerns meaning. Does a metaphorical statement possess, in addition to its literal meaning (with respect to which the statement will be, typically, absurd or false or pointless), another (metaphorical) meaning wherein resides its capacity to be true as well as to provide the twist of insight we derive from some good metaphors? Or is the magic of metaphors not a matter of the meaning of their words, but a feature of the contexts of their use, of their "pragmatics"? This question cannot be argued completely, or even sensibly for very long, without the background of a general theory of meaning.[4] Both Hobbes and Locke have such theories which dictate their assessments of metaphor. I risk the opinion that only Donald Davidson and Paul Ricoeur, among the speakers at this symposium, possess developed theories of meaning, and their views of the semantics of metaphor are consistent with their general semantic theories. They give opposite answers to the question: Ricoeur invests metaphors with meaning; Davidson denies that they mean anything besides what they mean literally. Each answer has as much to do with a conception of meaning and the theory of meaning as with an attitude toward metaphor.

The other objection to the hasty assimilation of metaphors to the class of semantically normal sentences is oblique and a bit diagnostic. Why quarrel with the negative assessment of the meaning of metaphors? Because it's wrong? That would be a good reason. There has been, however, an equally compelling, implicit reason in the conviction that unless metaphors are full-fledged entities of the preferred sort, there can be nothing in them worth true philosophical investigation. If metaphors are not the sort of thing that bears knowledge, than they could be left to psychologists, anthropologists, and literary critics or theorists but could not support philosophical attention. Locke and others hold a conception of the most, or only, valuable kind of language

4. It might seem that the question of whether metaphors have meaning could be settled independently, and then theories of meaning themselves be judged as to whether they give the right answer. I do not see how to do this. What can be done, I think, is to make such a strong case for the indispensability of metaphors that if the best available theory of meaning won't give them any, then it needn't be a defect to be meaning*less*.

and then observe that metaphors do not qualify. The apparently most satisfying response, and what is becoming the dominant one, is to insist upon the qualifications of metaphors; but this is to meet the challenge on its own grounds. The whole progression recalls the Aristotelian response to what is taken to be Plato's denigration of art. If Plato castigates art because it lacks a direct relation to knowledge, then the sharpest possible rebuttal would seem to be one which asserts that art *is* an implement of knowing. But in this response's implication that art is, therefore, worthwhile, there is the further implication that Plato was right about the main point, that knowledge is what matters. Should we accept that point? Should we accept the correlate point about metaphor? Even if we did, and supposed that metaphors could share in the preeminent philosophical prize only if they partook of meaning, truth, and knowledge, it would still be worth knowing whether they serve a lesser good. To learn this we will have to understand better than we do how metaphors are actually created and reacted to, whether or not these are matters of meaning. This is a major concern in the papers of Booth, Harries, de Man, and Ricoeur.

For my part, I will take another look at the half loaf left to metaphor by those who meant to deny it any serious philosophical importance. If metaphors have no "cognitive content" and, therefore, no part in the canonically serious use of language, then of what use are they? Even critics as harsh as Hobbes and Locke cannot think that every metaphor must result from either a lapse in linguistic competence or a perverse wish to mislead or inflame. Then what is the point in making a metaphor? Think of a relatively mundane metaphor. Make it one about which there would be little quarrel: both camps (the detractors and the appreciators) would agree that however things stand with potent, fecund, generative metaphors, this one does nothing spectacular or exotic. It can be paraphrased literally with so little remainder as makes no difference, and those who believe that metaphors say something and have a truth value will concede about this one that the same thing could be said literally.

Then why might you, or anyone, use this metaphor instead of a literal remark? To be eloquent? To decorate? To say something beautiful? Of course these could be your reasons, these "aesthetical impulses," and they are the kind of reasons suggested by those who condemn metaphor outright or consign it to the class of the inconsequential. Because I subscribe to the opinion that metaphors are peculiarly crystallized works of art, I am not surprised by this convergence of arguments about legitimacy. Just as self-appointed followers of Aristotle have swallowed Plato's pill and then found they could treat art with respect only if they could find knowledge in it, so latter-day friends of metaphor have thought that only if metaphors have all the semantic possibilities of literal language—and more—could metaphors be intellectually respect-

able. Otherwise they could be nothing more than small-scale art. But why? Is knowledge the only, or even the most important, concern? Is its formal semantics all that matters in the use of language, or the only correct and proper subject? Is a joke less important than a theorem even if it's a good joke and a trivial theorem?

I want to suggest a point in metaphor which is independent of the question of its cognitivity and which has nothing to do with its aesthetical character. I think of this point as the achievement of intimacy. There is a unique way in which the maker and the appreciator of a metaphor are drawn closer to one another. Three aspects are involved: (1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the hearer expends a special effort to accept the invitation; and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community. All three are involved in any communication, but in ordinary literal discourse their involvement is so pervasive and routine that they go unremarked. The use of metaphor throws them into relief, and there is a point in that.

An appreciator of a metaphor must do two things: he must realize that the expression is a metaphor, and he must figure out the point of the expression. His former accomplishment induces him to undertake the latter. Realizing the metaphorical character of an expression is often easy enough; it requires only the assumption that the speaker is not simply speaking absurdly or uttering a patent falsehood. But it can be a more formidable task: not every figurative expression which can survive a literal reading is a mere play on words. (You will not find more artful changes rung on this theme than those in the first sentence of Joyce's "The Dead": "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet.")

In both tasks—realizing that the expression is intended metaphorically, and seeing what to make of it—the hearer typically employs a number of assumptions about the speaker: what the speaker believes, what the speaker believes about what the hearer believes (which includes beliefs about what the speaker thinks the hearer can be expected to believe about the speaker).

During a departmental meeting you call your chairman a bolshevik. How does he take that? He does not think you are simply describing his formal political persuasion. Why not? Because he knows that you know he isn't a bolshevik.[5] So you aren't transmitting a fact because there is no fact, and everyone knows that and knows that everyone else knows that. Thus the chairman knows that you were not bent on reporting or recording a fact: you were speaking figuratively.

This sounds very complex, and of course nothing like the time and difficult effort suggested are actually undergone by the chairman just to

5. It would be different if he were a ninety-year-old immigrant, formerly Lenin's auxiliary (as some chairmen may be), but even then you would likely be up to something besides recording that long- and well-known fact.

realize that your expression is a metaphor; but, thought of as a reconstruction, this, or something like it, must underlie the chairman's realization that he has been offered a metaphor.

Once the chairman knows that you speak figuratively, he has then to unpack the figure to understand why you call him a bolshevik. In doing this he again moves through a network of assumptions, hypotheses, and inferences, *at the core of which is the literal sense of the expression* and some part of which overlaps the complex gone through earlier in achieving his realization that the utterance was a metaphor. I have toyed with the idea that there is an inverse correlation here, that the complexity of the reasoning which leads to "*p* is a metaphor" is inversely related to the complexity of unpacking *p* once it's seen to require unpacking—the idea being that the more unearthed in order to detect a metaphor, the less has to be added to decipher it. This is not the place to explore this idea; nor will I say anything about what must be called into play by the hearer when he works out the metaphor—what is meant by "bolshevik," what the speaker knows the hearer believes about bolsheviks, and the rest—for you can set that out as well as I.

The question is, Why do you put the chairman to all that trouble? Why does the chairman allow it and expend the effort? What is gained? One answer is that a transaction is precipitated in which you and the chairman actively engage one another in coping with a piece of language. He must penetrate your remark, so to speak, in order to explore you yourself, in order to grasp the import, for that import is not exactly *in* the remark itself. Furthermore, you know that he is doing this; you have invited him to do it; you have, in fact, required him to do it. He accepts the requirement, and you two become an intimate pair.

There is certainly intimacy in the literal use of language. Not even the most routine literal exchanges are passive—on either side. And the idea that language, used only literally, keeps us from really reaching one another's minds—because language is conventional and static, predetermining what can be said regardless of what we may want to say—is typically not only a sophomoric idea, but a deeply confused and mistaken one. And yet sometimes there is this wish to say something special, not to arouse, insinuate, or mislead, and not to convey an exotic meaning, but to initiate explicitly the cooperative act of comprehension which is, in any view, something more than a routine act of understanding.

The sense of close community results not only from the shared awareness that a special invitation has been given and accepted, but also from the awareness that not everyone could make that offer or take it up. In general, and with some obvious qualifications, it must be true that all literal use of language is accessible to all whose language it is. But a figurative use can be inaccessible to all but those who share information about one another's knowledge, beliefs, intentions, and attitudes. I think the community can be as small as you like, even a solitary pair: perhaps

only the chairman knows enough of what you think and feel (along with knowing that you know that he knows this) to take the point of your remark. And the group might be even smaller: surely the self-dialogue of the soul is often figurative.

In these respects metaphors are surprisingly like jokes. With a joke, too, there is first the realization that it *is* a joke and then the understanding—what's called getting the joke. I have refrained from supplying examples of metaphor, but I won't resist the chance to recite some jokes (for illustration only). I give three, in an effort to associate myself with Kant.

1. In the Soviet Union it is time for the national elections. Finding their voting machines in much the same condition as their combines at the time of the Russian wheat harvest, the Soviet election officials are unable to proceed. But then, availing themselves of detente, they appeal to the United States' Department of State. The State Department discovers some unused voting machines in Chicago and lends them to the Soviets. The election is held on schedule, and Mayor Daley becomes a member of the Praesidium.

Understanding this joke requires little more than a very general background. It is not even necessary to know who Mayor Daley was, although knowing that will add something, as will knowing that he is no longer alive. Metaphors are often like this. It requires little beyond the most elementary linguistic competence to detect and comprehend the metaphor in "Juliet is the sun," but the more you know about the sun, the more you will make of the metaphor.

2. What is Sacramento?
   It is the stuffing in a Catholic olive.[6]

This will be understood by considerably fewer people than grasp the first joke. Children, for instance, are unlikely to get it, even children who know of the Sacrament, for "pimento" is one of those words children seldom can recall. It is like the first joke in requiring two relatively discrete apprehensions: first, understanding that it is a joke and what the joke is, and then, second, finding it funny (if one does). This separation is even sharper in the second example, for there it is easier to imagine someone understanding perfectly well how the wordplay goes and yet finding nothing funny because the thrust seems anti-Catholic, or otherwise offensive. A metaphor is like this when, although it is clear enough what connections are intended and how they are supposed to be made, there is still no magic click, no real point in forcing those connections.

6. Thanks to Richard Bernstein for at least half this joke, and a good bit more.

3. What is a goy?
   An answer recently current at M.I.T. is that a goy is a girl if examined at or before time *t*, and a boy if examined after *t*.[7]

This joke is radically esoteric. It is, accordingly, understood by a very few people. A more interesting consequence of its hermetic character is that grasping it seems to be an all-or-nothing matter. There is not a sharp difference between understanding what the joke is and finding it funny. The recognition that it is a joke and the comprehension of just what the joke is are very nearly all there is to a complete response. Jokes of this kind are the ones most clearly undermined by any need for instruction in the background material. Some jokes can survive a preface of the form "First you will need to know that . . . ," but example three is of a kind that can't. I suspect that metaphors are like this when they must, to be effective, deliver their twist compactly and all at once, without exegesis.

The property in common with metaphors that all three jokes are meant to illustrate is the capacity to form or acknowledge a (progressively more select) community and thereby to establish an intimacy between the teller and the hearer. There may be more features in common. In particular, I am tempted to infer that there can be no effective procedures for dealing with metaphors. This means that there can be no routine method for (1) detecting metaphors when they appear, just as there are no foolproof rules for determining when someone is joking, or (2) unpacking the metaphor once it is known to be one, just as there is no standard method for explaining a joke.[8] This must be related to the fact that often a paraphrase fails to do the job of its metaphor in much the same way that an explanation fails to replace a joke.

Before leaving off and commending to you this topic of linguistic intimation,[9] I would like to warn against a possible misstep. Intimacy sounds like a good thing, and I have been urging attention to the use of metaphor in its cultivation. It is not, however, an invariably friendly thing, nor is it intended to be. Sometimes one draws near another in

7. This joke was purveyed and, I think, created by George Boolos, who is free to decline both credits. Guides to its hermeneutics may be found in Nelson Goodman's *Fact, Fiction, & Forecast* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 74–75, and Leo Rosten's *Joys of Yiddish* (New York, 1968), p. 141.

8. In earlier papers, while claiming that there is no determinate routine for constructing the meaning or point of a metaphor, I suggested that there is a general scheme for identifying metaphors. I no longer think that must be so.

9. Professor Marrie Bergmann, a member of the conference, referred me to Martin Joos' *The Five Clocks* (Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics, publication no. 22 [Bloomington, Ind., 1962]); it is a remarkably interesting study which discusses ways in which intimacy is achieved by means of linguistic style. Joos is not concerned with figurative uses, but with the use of "incorrect" language—jargon, for instance; but the similarities are worth pursuing.

order to deal a penetrating thrust. When the device is a hostile metaphor or a cruel joke requiring much background and effort to understand, it is all the more painful because the victim has been made a complicitor in his own demise. Do not, therefore, suppose that jokes are always for shared amusement, or metaphors always for communal insight. Some of the most instructive examples will be ones in which intimacy is sought as a means to a lethal and one-sided effect. I leave the construction of examples to you.

I have just begun to open this topic for myself and hope to participate in elaborating two of its themes. As precisely and delicately as we can describe it, what is the character of this linguistic intimacy, and how, in general and in detail, is it attained? And then what good is it—what is it for? Perhaps you will find these questions useful when mulling over the rich variety of example metaphors used in the papers to come.