Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth

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Part II: Unfamiliar noises: Hesse and Davidson on metaphor

We speak of one thing being like some other thin, when what we are really craving to do is to describe something that is like nothing on earth.
-- Vladimir Nabokov

Philosophers of science like Mary Hesse have helped us realize that metaphor is essential to scientific progress. This realization has encouraged Hesse and others to argue for 'the cognitive claims of metaphor'. She is concerned to give metaphorical sentences of truth and reference – to find worlds for them to be about; 'imaginative symbolic worlds that have relations with natural reality other than those of predictive interest … utopias, fictional exposes of the moral features of this world by caricature and other means, and all kinds of myths symbolic of our understanding of nature, society and the gods'. Like many other philosophers of this century (e.g., Cassirer, Whitehead, Heidegger, Gadamer, Habermas, Goodman, Putnam) she sees over-attention to the natural sciences as having distorted modern philosophy. Following Habermas, Hesse sees cognition as wider than the satisfaction of our 'technical interest' and as extending to 'the practical interest of personal communication and the emancipatory interest of critique of ideology'. In discourse which satisfies these interests, Hesse says, 'metaphor remains the necessary mode of speech'. So she believes that metaphor 'poses a radical challenge to contemporary philosophy' and that we need 'a revised ontology and theory of knowledge and truth' in order to do justice to metaphor as an instrument of cognition.

I agree with Hesse that over-attention to natural science has skewed philosophy, but I do not think that her strategy is sufficiently radical to let us correct the error. For one way in which this skewing is evident is that we philosophers still tend to take 'cognition' as the highest compliment we can pay to discourse. We take 'cognitive claims' as the most important claims which can be made for a given sort of language. Were we not concerned to raise the rest of discourse to the level of science, we would not be so concerned to broaden our use of terms like 'truth', 'refers to a world' and 'meaning' so as to make them relevant to metaphor.

To correct the error of the tradition, to help ourselves see natural science as simply an instrument of prediction and control rather than as a standard-setting are of culture, we need instead to restrict the applicability of these semantical terms. We need to see that the applicability of such terms is not a measure of the cultural importance of a use of language, but merely of the extent to which language-use can be predicted and controlled on the basis of presently-available, widely-shared, theory. We should see semantical notions as applicable only to familiar and relatively uninteresting uses of words, and 'cognition' as the positivists saw it: confined to familiar and relatively uninteresting uses of language, to discourses for which there are generally accepted procedures for fixing belief. We should find other compliments to pay other sorts of discourse rather than trying to 'broaden' either semantic or epistemic notions.

In particular, we should follow Davidson rather than (as Hesse does) Black in our account of metaphor. For, by putting metaphor outside the pale of semantics, insisting that a metaphorical sentences has no meaning other than its literal one, Davidson lets us see metaphors on the model of unfamiliar events in the natural world – CAUSES of changing beliefs and desires – rather than on the model of REPRESENTATIONS of unfamiliar worlds, worlds which are 'symbolic' rather than 'natural'. He lets us see the metaphors which make possible novel scientific theories as causes of our ability to know more about the world, rather than expressions of such knowledge. He thereby makes it possible to see other metaphors as causes of our ability to do lots of other things – e.g., be more sophisticated and interesting people, emancipate ourselves from tradition, transvalue our values, gain or lose religious faith – without having to interpret these latter abilities as functions of increased COGNITIVE ability. Not the least of the advantages of Davidson's view, I shall be arguing, is that it gives us a better account of the role played in our lives by metaphorical expressions which are not sentences – scraps of poetry which send shivers down our spine, non-sentential phrases which reverberate endlessly change our selves and our patterns of action, without ever coming to express belief or desires.

The issue between Black and Davidson has struck many people as factitious. Both philosophers insist that metaphors are unparaphrasable, and also that they are not merely ornamental. But Black thinks that a defense of these claims requires the notion of 'metaphorical meaning' and Davidson denies this. Clearly they are using 'meaning' in different ways, and so it is easy to suspect that the issue is verbal. But we can see that something important is at stake by looking at Black's claims that Davidson is 'fixated' on 'the explanatory power of standard sense' and that his account gives us 'no insight into how metaphors work'. These assertions show that Black and Davidson differ not just about how to use the term 'meaning' but about the ends which a theory of meaning should serve, about the point and reach of semantics.

Davidson is, indeed, 'fixated' on the explanatory power of standard sense. But this is because he thinks that semantical notions like 'meaning' have a role only within the quite narrow (though shifting) limits of regular, predictable, linguistic behavior – the limits which mark off (temporarily) the literal use of language. In Quine's image, the realm of meaning is a relatively small 'cleared' area within the jungle of use, one whose boundaries are constantly being both extended and encroached upon. To say, as Davidson does, that 'metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use' is simply to say that, because metaphors (while still alive) are unparaphrasable, they fall outside the cleared area. By contrast, if one regards meaning and use as co-extensive, one will be inclined to adopt what Hesse calls a 'network view of language' – one according to which, as she says, 'the use of a predicate in a new situation in principle shifts, however little, the meaning of every other words and sentence in the language'.

Davidson's resistance to this 'network' view can be put in terms of an analogy with dynamics. In the case of the gravitational effects of the movements of very small and faraway particles (a phenomenon to which Hesse analogizes the insensible but continuous process of meaning-change), physicists must simply disregard insensible perturbations and concentrate on relatively conspicuous and enduring

regularities. So it is with the study of language-use. The current limits of those regularities fix the current limits of the cleared area called 'meaning'. So where 'the explanatory power of standard sense' comes to an end, so does semantics.

If one holds a different conception of the limits of semantics and of philosophical explanation, as Black and Hesse do, this is probably because one has a different conception of the reach of philosophy. Davidson's metaphilosophical approach differs from theirs as Newton's metascientific approach to dynamics differed from Leibniz's; the one is an approach which describes regularities without venturing on hypotheses about the underlying forces at work, while the other tries to go further in the direction of what Leibniz called 'metaphysics'. Hesse's demand for a new ontology, and her praise of Ricoeur as the only theorist of metaphor who 'recognizes an ontological foundation for metaphor other than the naturalistic one', are indications of this difference.

The need to go further in a 'metaphysical' direction than Davidson wants to go is also felt by Michael Dummett, who denies that the task of the philosopher of language has been completed when we have described the process of constructing translation manuals, exhibited the ways in which we are able to predict (and, in some measure, control) linguistic behavior. Thus when Davidson says that 'the ability to communicate by speech consists in the ability to make oneself understood and to understand', and that this ability does not require 'shared grammar or rules' or 'a portable interpreting machine set to grind out the meaning of an arbitrary utterance', Dummett suggests that this is true only of the idiosyncratic features of idiolects. When Davidson says that 'we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions', Dummett replies that 'Conventions, whether they be expressly taught or picked up piecemeal, are what constitutes a social practice; to repudiate the role of convention is to deny that a language is in this sense a practice.'

This exchange brings out the fact that, whereas Davidson is content with an outside view, with discovering the sort of behavioral regularities in which a radical interpreter would be interested, Dummett wants to take up, so to speak, a position inside the speaker or the speaker's community. He wants to discover the rules or conventions which form the program of an interpreting machine. For only if there is something like that to find, Dummett thinks, can one 'throw light on what meaning is'. Dummett thinks that if we follow Davidson in jettisoning the notion of a 'language', then 'our theories of meaning have no subject-matter'. Davidson, by contrast, thinks that there is nothing called 'meaning' whose nature is mysterious, and that philosophy of language need no more offer theories about the nature of such a mysterious thing than Newton's PRINCIPIA needed to offer a theory about the nature of gravity. Gravity was not the subject-matter of that book, but rather various regular motions; meaning is not the subject-matter either of a radical interpreter's T-theory or of philosophy of language, but rather behavior.

To be sure, the behavior in question is typically, but not necessarily, behavior which is sufficiently regular among large numbers of people to give those people a handle for notions like 'correctness', 'rule' and 'social practice'. But the utility of such normative notions within a community for controlling and changing the members' linguistic behavior is independent of the utility of translation manuals for predicting that behavior. Only when there are sufficient regularities for the insider's normative notions to apply will there be sufficient for the outsider's interpretative, semantical, notions to apply. But this coextensiveness does not mean that the former notions 'ground' or 'explain' or 'complement' the latter, or that the two sets of notions are relevant to each other in any other way. So the job of the philosopher of language is, for Davidson, finished when the latter notions are explicated by reference to the radical interpreter's procedures.

Only if one agrees with Dummett that what makes understanding possible is something like a portable interpreting machine will one be inclined to think Black's question 'how does metaphor work?' a good one. More specifically, only then will one assume that there is something called 'mastery of a language' which includes an ability to 'get the point' of metaphorical uses of bits of that language. Conversely, only if one thinks that there is such a thing as 'the point' of such a use will we be inclined to think of our ability to understand a metaphor as the result of the working of such a machine. For only if one has already put irregular and unpredictable uses of language within the reach of notions like 'mastery of the language', will one think of reactions to metaphors as dictated by rules, or conventions, or the program of an interpreting machine. Only then will one think 'How do metaphors work?' a better question than 'What is the nature of the unexpected?' or 'How do surprises work?'

It is of course true that if you do not know English you will get no use out of such metaphors as 'Man is a wolf' or 'Metaphor is the dreamwork of language'. Your reaction to these metaphors will be as limited as your reactions to any other utterly unfamiliar noise. But it is one thing to say that the ability to grasp the literal meaning of an English sentence is causally necessary if you are to get something out of its metaphorical use and another to say that this ability insures that you will do so. If Davidson is right, NOTHING could insure that. The difference between a literal use and a metaphorical use of an English sentence is, on Davidson's view, precisely that 'knowing English' (that is, sharing the current theory about how to handle the linguistic behavior of English-speakers) is sufficient to understand the former. That is just why we call the use 'literal'. But nothing in existence prior to the metaphor's occurrence is sufficient to understand the metaphorical use. That is just why we call it 'metaphorical'. If 'understanding' or 'interpreting' means 'bringing under an antecedent scheme', then metaphors cannot be understood or interpreted. But if we extend these two notions to mean something like 'making use of' or 'coping with', then we can say that we come to understand metaphors in the same way that we come to understand anomalous natural phenomena. We do so by revising our theories so as to fit them around the new material. We interpret metaphors in the same sense in which we interpret such anomalies – by casting around for possible revisions in our theories which may help to handle the surprises.

Davidson does, occasionally, say things which seem to support the view that metaphors have 'cognitive content'. For example: 'Metaphors often make us notice aspects of things we did not notice before; no doubt they bring surprising analogies and similarities to our attention. …' But notice that the same can be said about anomalous non-linguistic phenomena like platypuses and pulsars. The latter do not (literally) TELL us anything, but they do make us notice things and start looking around for analogies and similarities. They do not have cognitive content, but they are responsible for a lot of cognitions. For if they had not turned up we should not have been moved to

formulate and deploy certain sentences which do have such content. As with platypuses, so with metaphors. The only important difference is that the platypus does not ITSELF come to express a literal truth, whereas the very same string of words which once formed a metaphorical utterance may, if the metaphor dies into literalness, come to convey such a truth. You may not have to kill the platypus to get a satisfactory theory of how it works, but you do have to kill off a metaphor to get a satisfactory theory of how IT works. For such a theory will give you a widely-accepted paraphrase, and a metaphor for which such a paraphrase is widely available is just what we mean by a dead metaphor.

I take Davidson to be saying that the positivists were on the right track both when they urged that meaning and cognitive content are coextensive, and when they deprived metaphor of cognitive content. They went wrong only when they failed to add that metaphors were necessary for gaining knowledge, even though they did not (while alive) express knowledge. If this interpretation is right, Davidson should deny what Black affirms: that to say, for example, 'Metaphor is the dreamwork of language' is to 'express a distinctive view of metaphor', a 'new INSIGHT into what metaphor is', to say something which a reader could 'understand or misunderstand', etc. He should say that, when he began 'What Metaphors Mean' with that metaphor, he was instead inviting the reader to participate in a 'creative endeavor'. As he puts it, if we 'give up the idea that the metaphor carries a message' then we can see that the various theories about 'how metaphors work' do not 'provide a method for deciphering an encoded content … [but] tell us (or try to tell us) something about the EFFECTS metaphors have on us'. Davidson can cheerfully agree with the positivists that these effects are 'psychological' rather than 'logical'. But the acquisition of knowledge is, after all, a psychological matter.

One reason philosophers like Habermas and Hesse – philosophers who are suspicious of positivism – are likely to be suspicious of Davidson's attack on 'the thesis that associated with metaphor is a definite cognitive content that its author wishes to convey' is that this seems to give the highest flights of genius the same metaphysical status as thunderclaps and birdsongs. It takes them out of the sphere of what Grice calls 'non-natural meaning' and reduces them to the level of mere stimuli, mere evocations. But such suspicion shows how many background assumptions Habermas and Hesse share with their positivist enemies. They share the Kantian presumption that there is some sort of inviolable 'metaphysical' break between the formal and the material, the logical and the psychological, the non-natural and the natural – between, in short, what Davidson calls 'scheme and content'.

For Davidson, the break between the realm of meaning and cognitive content (the realm in which it is useful to speak of norms and intentions), and the realm of 'mere' stimuli, is just the pragmatic and temporary break between stimuli whose occurrences are more or less predictable (on the basis of some antecedent theory) and stimuli which are not – a break whose location changes as theory changes and as, concomitantly, fresh new metaphors die off into literalness. The genius who transcends the predictable thereby transcends the cognitive and the meaningful. This is not to the discredit of the genius, but, if to anybody's, to that of the skeptical 'man of reason'. For neither knowledge nor morality will flourish unless somebody uses language for purposes other than making predictable moves in currently popular language-games. (Hesse goes too far in saying that metaphor is 'the necessary mode of speech' when fulfilling, e.g., Habermas' 'emancipatory interest'. Plain argumentative prose may, depending on circumstances, be equally useful. But it is certainly true that apt new metaphors have done a lot for radical emancipatory programs in morals and politics.)

One way to see why, if one repudiates Davidson's BETE NOIRE – the scheme-content view of meaning and cognition – one will want to analogize metaphor to birdsong is to note that traditional empiricism notoriously ran together the claim that sensory observation (of, e.g., birdsong) was a stimulus to knowledge and the claim that it CONVEYED knowledge. This confusion (exposed most thoroughly in Sellars' classic 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind') was between the claim that overhearing, e.g., an unfamiliar noise CAUSED you to acquire the belief that there was a quetzal in the forest and the claim that it 'conveyed the information' that there was a quetzal there. The empiricist slogan 'Nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses' traded on this confusion, on the ambiguity in 'source of knowledge' between 'cause of belief' and 'justification of belief'.

The same ambiguity arises in the case of 'metaphor is an indispensable source of knowledge'. If we accept the Black-Hesse-Searle view that metaphors convey information, they will be able to function as reasons for belief. On Davidson's view, by contrast, 'live' metaphors can justify belief only in the same metaphorical sense in which one may 'justify' a belief not by citing another belief but by using a non-sentence to stimulate one's interlocutor's sense organs – hoping thereby to cause assent to a sentence. (As when someone holds up a probative photograph and asks 'NOW do you believe?')

The relation between birdsong, poetic imagery (the poets' wood-notes wild) and the sort of metaphorical uses of sentences discussed by Black and Davidson may be clarified by considering the following spectrum of unfamiliar noises:

(1) A noise in the primeval forest, heard for the first time and eventually discovered to be the song of a bird hitherto unknown to science, the quetzal.
(2) The first utterance of an 'imagistic' and 'poetic' phrase – e.g., 'that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea'.
(3) The first intentional use of an apparently false or pointless sentence – e.g., 'She set me ablaze', 'Metaphor is the dreamwork of language', 'Man is a wolf', 'No man is an island'.
(4) The first (startling, highly paradoxical) utterance of a sentence which, though still construed literally by reference to a theory which antedated it, comes eventually to be taken as truistic – e.g., 'No harm can come to a good man', 'Love is the only law', 'The earth whirls round the sun', 'There is no largest set', 'The heavens will fill with commerce', 'Meaning does not determine reference'.

Consider what happens as each of these unfamiliar noises becomes more and more integrated into our practices, better and better coped with. (1) Helps bring into existence a taxonomy of the avifauna of Central America. In time the call of the quetzal is one more occasion for the heavens filling with commerce, as wealthy bird-watchers fly in. The bird's call never acquires a non-natural meaning, but it does

acquire a place in our causal stories about our interaction with the world. The question 'What does that noise mean?' now has answers (e.g., 'It means there is a quetzal around'; 'It means that our village can get in on the tourist industry').

The fragment of Yeats – (2) – also does not acquire a non-natural meaning. But it acquires a place in people's practices – not just in the Yeats industry but in the lives of all those who find themselves remembering it, being haunted by it. It becomes part of what such people are able to say (neither about gongs, dolphins, the sea or Byzantium, nor ABOUT anything else), but not part of what they know. People's linguistic repertoires are thus enlarged, and their lives and actions changed in ways they cannot easily articulate. But they have not acquired any beliefs which these particular words express. They would not claim to have acquired INFORMATION from Yeats. Black's apparatus of 'filters' – which, in his 'Man is a wolf' example, are supposed to highlight the wolfish features of humanity – is irrelevant to this sort of non-sentential fragment, a fragment which lacks what Black calls a 'primary subject'. Yeats is not interested in making us notice something about the sea, nor about anything else which he or we can usefully put a finger on.

Between (2) and (3) we cross the fuzzy and fluctuating line between natural and non-natural meaning, between stimulus and cognition, between a noise having a place in a causal network and having, in addition, a place in a patter of justification of belief. Or, more precisely, we begin to cross this line if and when these unfamiliar noises acquire familiarity and lose vitality through being not just mentioned (as the Yeats fragment was) but used: used in arguments, cited to justify beliefs, treated as counters within a social practice, employed correctly or incorrectly.

The difference between (3) and (4) is the difference between fresh metaphorical sentences and fresh paradoxes. These two blend into one another, but a rough sorting can be made by asking whether the first utterer of what seems a blatantly false remark can offer arguments for what he says. If he can, it is a paradox. If not, it is a metaphor. Both are the sort of noises which, on first hearing, 'make no sense'. But as metaphors get picked up, bandied about, and begin to die, and as paradoxes begin to function as conclusions, and later as premises, of arguments, both sorts of noises start to convey information. The process of becoming stale, familiar, unparadoxical and platitudinous is the process by which such noises cross the line from 'mere' causes of beliefs to reasons for belief.

Crossing this line is not the acquisition of a new metaphysical character, but simply the process of becoming, through increasingly predictable utterance, usefully describable in intentionalistic language – describable as an expression of belief. For a noise to become so describable is for it to assume a place in a pattern of justification of belief. This can, under propitious circumstances, happen to any noise; one can even imagine it happening to the example I have placed under (1) and (2). It is pointless to ask what there is about the noise which brings about this double describability, as noise and as language. Whether it occurs is a matter of what is going on in the rest of the universe, not of something which lay deep within the noise itself. This double describability (as cause and reason, noise and language) is brought about not by the unfolding of latent content (like a Leibnizian mold), but by unpredictable shifts in causal relations to other noises (like a Newtonian corpuscle). If it does come about, we can look back and explain what features of the noise suited it for this process of familiarization, but there is no way to do so prospectively. For similar reasons, there is no way of telling geniuses from eccentrics, or creativity from idle paradox-mongering, or poetry from babble, prior to seeing how utterances are, over the course of centuries, received. To ask 'how metaphors work' is like asking how genius works. If we knew that, genius would be superfluous. If we knew how metaphors work they would be like the magician's illusions: matters of amusement, rather than (as Hesse rightly says they are) indispensable instruments of moral and intellectual progress.