

Rorty, Davidson, and Metaphor

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(ABSTRACT)

In his essay "What Metaphors Mean," Donald Davidson gave a striking view of metaphor, claiming that metaphorical utterances have no meaning beyond the literal meanings of the words contained in them. Richard Rorty claims that this view of metaphor can be used to argue that cultural, moral, and scientific change (all products of metaphor) are contingent. I will argue that Davidson's view of metaphor is not consistent with Davidson's overall principles of theory construction, and, hence, is not consistent with his theory of linguistic meaning. Furthermore, I will argue that Rorty himself has significantly misinterpreted Davidson's view of metaphor.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As a whole the work of Richard Rorty calls for a “post-philosophical” culture that gives up the quest of “objective truth,” that abandons the pursuit of “representing the world accurately,” and that rejects the philosophical distinction between knowing, or representing, subject and object.¹ Rorty also recommends that we reject the distinctions between philosophy, literature, and the natural sciences and instead see them all as different ways we use to cope with the world, none more important or more “true” than another.² In perhaps his most influential work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty claims that since Descartes philosophers have been stifled by attempting to conceptualize the world in terms of the metaphor of the mind as a mirror which reflects the world. Rorty believes that this framework, where epistemology is the supreme area of philosophy and where philosophy as a whole lords over the other disciplines, has outlived its usefulness. A post-philosophical culture would view art and science as equals, with neither having greater claim to truth than the other. In the realm of morality and politics the post-philosophical culture would give up the attempt to ground morality in metaphysical claims about the world and human “essence.”

Most of these claims, of course, mirror the “classical” themes of pragmatism formulated by thinkers such as William James and especially John Dewey.³ One thing that makes Rorty’s revival of these themes so interesting is the way he has drawn upon work by philosophers writing after Dewey and James. This eclectic resource has included philosophers from both the analytic and continental traditions.

A huge influence on Rorty from the analytic tradition has been the philosophy of Donald Davidson, especially Davidson’s philosophy of language. Davidson’s account of language and interpretation fits well into Rorty’s project because, according to Rorty, it eschews the idea that language is a medium between us and the world. But one can be more specific about this influence by isolating the use to which Rorty puts Davidson’s theory of metaphor. Davidson has a unique explanation of how metaphors work, and Rorty expands this view to create a larger theory about the contingency of language and, from this, an account of cultural, intellectual, and moral progress in the West.

Rorty’s use of Davidson’s view of metaphor is to some degree tied to his embrace of Davidson’s overall theory of language. Rorty claims that Davidson’s approach to language is “the first systematic treatment of language which breaks *completely* with the notion of language as something which can be adequate or inadequate to the world or to the self. For Davidson breaks with the notion that language is a *medium*- a medium of either representation or expression.”⁴ Rorty sees Davidson’s theories about language as a way of dropping the philosophical framework which turns on the notion that there is a significant distinction between subject and object. Davidson’s arguments against the idea that language is a medium between the self and the world, coupled with his rejection of

¹*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 1.

²*Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. xliii.

³For Rorty’s acknowledged debt to Dewey see *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.

⁴*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 10.

the notion that there are different “conceptual schemes” which lead to alternative and incommensurable ways of organizing reality,⁵ have been marshaled by Rorty to combat the traditional philosophical image of the mind as a mirror which reflects, accurately or inaccurately, the world.

But my chief interest in Rorty’s use of Davidson’s philosophy concerns Davidson’s theory of metaphor. Historically, philosophers have claimed that tropes, like metaphor, are mere linguistic decorations; they lend vividness and emotional impact to sentences, but have no cognitive status. In the analytic tradition this view persisted up through the end of logical positivism. Today most philosophers agree that metaphor has some cognitive import, but there is much disagreement about the nature of that import and how it is generated. Since language is saturated by metaphor, a correct theory of how metaphors work, how they provide meaning, and how they may eventually become literal expressions is important to the philosophy of language.

Davidson’s theory of metaphor stands apart from most others because it holds that the words used in metaphorical expressions do not take on a figurative meaning. For Davidson the words in a metaphorical expression retain their literal sense and gain their metaphorical status in virtue of their being used in unfamiliar ways. Moreover, Davidson agrees with previous accounts of metaphor which claim that metaphors have no cognitive content beyond whatever content is contained in their literal meaning. He does not agree, however, that they are mere ornaments of language. They may provoke thought and insight about the world but not by representing it. Whereas most theories of metaphor would explain the metaphor as presenting or conveying these ideas and meanings about humanity, Davidson sees it as conveying only the meaning available from the literal meaning of the words in the statement. Traditional theories claim that there is an additional, figurative meaning above that contained in the literal meanings of the words. For Davidson literal meaning is all there is.

Rorty claims that this theory of metaphor can provide us with a non-teleological view of intellectual history and allows us to see the contingent nature of language. Davidson’s theory, according to Rorty, accounts for shifts in “vocabularies,” broadly conceived as sets of discourse or theories about the world which help us cope with the world. Or, to put it in the language of evolutionary theory, these vocabularies help us adapt to our environment. New metaphors, since they have no place in the current “language game,” cause us to think in new ways. Eventually they create a new language game and then take on a truth-value in it. Rorty puts the contingent nature of this process in the following way: the Davidsonian conception of metaphor allows us to see language “as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing off old forms-- not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly.”⁶

The aim of my thesis is two-fold: to critically evaluate Davidson’s theory of metaphor and then to investigate the implications of my evaluation for Rorty’s views,

⁵See “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” from *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 183-198.

⁶*CI&S*, p. 19.

which are based on that theory. The subject of my thesis, then, is metaphor, but the ultimate goal is an assessment of Rorty's wide ranging claims about metaphor, claims based on Davidson's theory.

Few can deny that metaphor is a dynamic area of language; however, issues concerning its exact nature, compass, and power are clearly factious. It is my hope that this thesis will provide greater understanding of these issues. My thesis is not, though, a survey of theories of metaphor. Many important philosophers, including John Searle, Nelson Goodman, Stanley Cavell, and Mary Hesse (to mention only those in the analytic tradition), have offered their own accounts of metaphors. And though each theory provides a unique explanation, there is something they all share which distinguishes them from Davidson's version. They all agree with Max Black that metaphors carry some additional cognitive content and that the words in a metaphor take on a special figurative meaning. Davidson rejects these claims.

In *Models and Metaphors* (1962) Black gave the first systematic treatment of metaphor within analytic philosophy that extended beyond the earlier claims of positivists that metaphor could be dismissed as an obtrusive or unimportant ornamental feature of natural languages. Black's theory will serve as a background against which to understand better the nature of Davidson's claims.

My thesis will proceed as follows. The first chapter of this thesis will provide an overview of Rorty's exposition and use of Davidson's theory and my own brief account of that theory. The second chapter will be devoted to exposition of Black's and Davidson's theories of metaphor. Chapter Three will be a critical evaluation of Davidson's view, and my criticisms of Davidson will be internal ones. That is, I will attempt to show that Davidson's view of metaphor, while consistent with his particular theory of linguistic meaning, is inconsistent with his principles of theory construction. It is inconsistent specifically with the principle of charity and the empirical spirit of his general strategy for theory construction. I hope to demonstrate that Davidson's principles of theory construction are more compatible with the idea that metaphors have meaning beyond the literal, that a speaker of a metaphor says something beyond the literal, and that the figurative meaning of a metaphorical utterance can be stable and shared.⁷ Moreover, I will attempt to reveal how Davidson's theory of meaning can be adjusted to account for metaphorical meaning. However, I will leave the nature of metaphorical meaning somewhat unexplained and mysterious. My aim is only to show that we can give an account of what a person means, beyond the literal, in using a metaphor. A full explanation of exactly how this process works is a task beyond the scope of this thesis.

In Chapter Four I will examine the results such a revision of Davidson's theory, if successful, has for Rorty's arguments about the contingency of intellectual history. Also in Chapter Four I hope to show that even if my arguments in Chapter Three fail, Rorty cannot base an argument for contingency on Davidson's view of metaphor because Rorty's position rests on a misunderstanding of Davidson's view. I will argue that in

⁷As I will point out in Chapter Three, these claims may only be true for a certain class of simple, or "low-level," metaphors.

expanding the domain of what counts as metaphorical utterance, Rorty ignores a vital distinction Davidson makes between a new *literal* use of a word, and a metaphorical use of a word.

In claiming that Rorty's arguments are wrong I am not attempting to defend the view that scientific, moral, and cultural change are not contingent. I am claiming only that Rorty's arguments based on Davidson's view of metaphor are unsuccessful at demonstrating such contingency.

CHAPTER TWO: METAPHOR AND THE CONTINGENCY OF INTELLECTUAL CHANGE

2.1 Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*

Rorty discusses Davidson's theory of metaphor in significant detail in two separate works, a 1987 article, "Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor,"⁸ and in his 1989 book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (CI&S)*. We will look at both, but start with and focus more attention on *CI&S*. "Unfamiliar Noises" describes the conceptual consequences of Davidson's view of metaphor, as Rorty interprets it, and defends Davidson's view against alternative accounts. It is in *CI&S*, though, that Rorty puts Davidson's view to use. In this book Rorty constructs his pragmatist and somewhat free-wheeling and colorful political philosophy, which, though it is heavily influenced by many thinkers Rorty admires (such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and several others), depends significantly on Davidson's theory of metaphor. As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, Rorty feels that pragmatism, or his version of it, has much to gain from Davidson's overall philosophical project. However, it is only in *CI&S* that Rorty puts Davidson's philosophy to systematic use, and there it is Davidson's theory of metaphor which has an instrumental role in Rorty's attempt to overcome traditional accounts of moral, intellectual, and cultural change. In this chapter I will summarize *CI&S*, sketch out the Davidsonian account of metaphor, and then explain the function of that account in Rorty's book.

The book is composed of several related themes and may be briefly outlined this way. According to Rorty, many traditional political philosophers have built their systems around the assumption that reconciliation between public and private perfection is possible and desirable.⁹ Plato may be taken as the paradigm instance of this kind of philosopher. In Plato's system the perfectly just person is the person whose level of knowledge is perfect, whose reason attaches to the most intelligible objects there are, the Forms.

Rorty claims that such a fusion between public and private perfection is not possible within a *philosophical theory*, yet it may be possible, to some degree, in practice. Such a fusion at the level of theory requires a shared "human essence," some necessary and defining aspect common to all of us. It also requires a synthesis of the "vocabularies" (sets of similar theories, discourse, and concepts) of private self-perfection and self-creation, and that of justice and public-perfection.¹⁰ Employing ideas and arguments from

⁸Reprinted in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

⁹Rorty defines one version of private perfection as the task of self-creation and discovery in the face of understanding that neither the world nor human beings have an essential nature. When confronted by our own contingency we are free to reinvent, or more accurately, "redescribe" ourselves according to our own ideals. Other versions could entail emotional maturity, mastery of one's trade, or union with God. Public perfection, on the other hand, is the process of improving our public lives. For Rorty the ideal citizen is a liberal, or, a person who thinks "that cruelty is the worst thing we can do" (*CI&S*, p. xv).

¹⁰*CI&S*, p. xiv.

Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Freud, Heidegger, and Davidson, Rorty attempts to convince us that neither of these requirements can be met.

But if private-perfection is not compatible with justice and the goal of human solidarity at the level of theory, what makes this unification possible at the practical level? Rorty believes that solidarity and public perfection will never be the product of something we discover about humanity, nor will it be the result of an ideal political system deduced from first principles. Rather it is created through a cultivated compassion. And this compassion is better cultivated through understanding the details of people's lives, especially lives which are different (whether subtly or obviously) from our own. Rorty describes this sort of understanding as "a certain kind of know-how" or "skill," rather than as knowing "certain crucial propositions to be true."¹¹ Moreover, he sees literature as the most effective vehicle to this kind of understanding: "This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist's report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel."¹² This understanding is ultimately played out as an increase in human solidarity, which is the ultimate goal of his political philosophy and much of his work in general. He defines solidarity as

the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to humiliation - the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us."¹³

To demonstrate the role of the novel in moral progress Rorty devotes two chapters of *CI&S* to analyses of Orwell's *1984* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. He claims that the character of O'Brien in the former exemplifies a certain possible personality type, one of severe cruelty. Rorty claims that the character of O'Brien, and his real-life counterparts throughout history, serve as a reminder that there is nothing essential about human nature which rules out this type of extreme cruelty. In *Lolita* the character of Humbert Humbert represents a type of person who does not intend to be cruel, but whose quest for aesthetic bliss blinds him to the suffering of others. Humbert is "exquisitely sensitive to everything which affects or provides expression for [his] own obsession, and entirely incurious about anything which affects anyone else."¹⁴ To the careful reader, novels can make us aware of the sometimes unconscious expressions of cruelty of which we are capable. Theory, by aiming past this goal, falls short of it. According to Rorty the search for ahistorical and universal human moral essence relies on a bankrupt framework for creating a better society.

For Rorty, as a pragmatist, theories are intelligently appropriated only to the extent that they satisfactorily resolve problems and are judged useful. So it is not that Rorty rejects theories outright just because they are theories. For him scientific theories and explanations are also ungrounded and contingent upon culture and time. However, they

¹¹ *CI&S*, p. 93.

¹² *CI&S*, p. xvi.

¹³ *CI&S*, p. 192.

¹⁴ *CI&S*, p. 158.

often prove themselves to be useful; they help us cope with the world by allowing us to predict and control our environment. Only this comprises any “essential” connection they may have to the world, and not a relation such as truth. Philosophical theories, however, usually provide us with no advantages similar to those of science.

However, Rorty does not think we should abandon philosophy completely any more than he thinks we should completely embrace science, or at least our current conception of it. He wants us to change our attitudes about both. Philosophy can be more usefully seen as a chapter in literary criticism. The history of philosophy would remain a storehouse of great intellectual achievement, and as a chapter of literary criticism philosophy could continue to contribute to advances in thought. But we would no longer think of it as a “discipline, a set of research programs, an autonomous sector of culture.”¹⁵ This reformed version of philosophy would dissolve the vision of the philosopher as someone who bootstraps herself outside of history and culture to view eternal truth.

Science, Rorty believes, is also due for a change, and one that is somewhat similar to the change philosophy needs. He feels that our current view of science entails notions of rationality and objectivity that we would do better to eradicate. These notions contain further “clumsy” distinctions, such as that between “hard facts and soft values, truth and pleasure.”¹⁶ According to Rorty these distinctions create more difficulties than they resolve, and are ultimately obstacles to solidarity. The scientist is, under this conception of science, the last priest of our secular culture, providing a “link between the human and the nonhuman.”¹⁷ This kind of framework for science keeps us trapped in the metaphysics of truth as correspondence. Thinking outside of this framework would give us an understanding and rhetoric that

would mention particular concrete achievements - paradigms - more, and “method” less. There would be less talk about rigor and more about originality. The image of the great scientist would not be of somebody who got it right but of somebody who made it new.¹⁸

Science thought of this way would be far more fitted to our needs than science understood as the pursuit of “objectivity” and “truth.” For Rorty, then, science and morality are, under their traditional conceptions, confined by a “vocabulary” which stresses terms and concepts such as “objectivity,” “universal,” “Truth,” and “ahistorical.” Again, according to Rorty such a vocabulary hinders rather than helps human development.

¹⁵ *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 213.

¹⁶ “Science as Solidarity,” from *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 36.

¹⁷ ‘SS’, p. 39.

¹⁸ ‘SS’, p. 44.

2.2 Précis of Davidson's Theory of Metaphor

Before spelling out in detail how Rorty uses Davidson's theory, it is first necessary to outline very briefly Davidson's general philosophy of language, and, a little less briefly, his positive view of metaphor, much of which is built upon his criticisms of traditional views. These criticisms, found in his paper "What Metaphors Mean," will be extensively considered in Chapter Two.

Davidson's philosophy of language aims primarily at providing a theory of meaning. The introduction to *Inquiries* begins with the question, "What is it for words to mean what they do?" He believes that any theory of meaning must satisfy two demands: "it would provide an interpretation of all utterances, actual and potential, of a speaker or group of speakers; and it would be verifiable without knowledge of the detailed propositional attitudes of the speaker."¹⁹ Davidson also claims that such a theory must be constrained by the notion of radical interpretation, meaning that interpretation must proceed without any prior knowledge of, or assumptions about, the meanings of a speaker's utterances. For him this constraint is global, in the sense that interpretation involves radically interpreting members of one's own speech community as well as foreign tongues: "All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation."²⁰

The constraint of radical interpretation shapes the rest of Davidson's theory of meaning which results in a unique and interesting holism of meaning, belief, and truth. The interdependence of the three works this way. First, belief and meaning must, in radical interpretation, be understood simultaneously; neither can count as evidence for understanding the other. As Davidson says

Since we cannot hope to interpret linguistic activity without knowing what a speaker believes and cannot found a theory of what he means on a prior discovery of his beliefs and intentions, I conclude that in interpreting utterances from scratch - in radical interpretation - we must somehow deliver simultaneously a theory of belief and a theory of meaning.²¹

Truth fills in the last part of this triad by essentially explaining what the meaning of an utterance is, and for Davidson the meaning of an utterance is simply the conditions in the world which would make the utterance true. Thus Davidson uses truth to get at meaning. So when we radically interpret a speaker we correlate an utterance with the conditions which would make it true.²²

One final cord ties these three elements together, and that is the principle of charity. This is simply a principle of interpretation, demanded by the constraints of radical interpretation, which holds that we should assume that most of a speaker's beliefs are true or that most of the speaker's beliefs are in agreement with ours. It can also be seen as an assumption about the rationality of the speaker. These are roughly equivalent readings of

¹⁹*Inquiries*, p. xiii.

²⁰*Inquiries*, p. 125.

²¹*Inquiries*, p. 144.

²²*Inquiries*, p. 23-27.

the principle for the general idea is that we need, in order to interpret at all, to make the best possible sense of the speaker. Davidson defends this principle in his famous “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” by claiming that if we did not assume that most of a speaker’s beliefs were true, or that the speaker operates under principles of reason similar to ours, then we could not understand his utterances to be communication, or understand him to be a rational being at all.²³ As I will briefly describe later, Rorty finds much of Davidson’s theory of meaning, in addition to his theory of metaphor, a useful supplement to pragmatism.

Turning to Davidson’s theory of metaphor, the operative feature of his positive theory is that for him metaphor is relevant to the area of pragmatics rather than the semantics of a language. Metaphor, then, is a function of the *use* of words and sentences, and this use depends entirely on the literal (Davidson uses the unloaded term “ordinary”) meanings of the words used. What makes Davidson’s view unique is what he denies in the traditional accounts, and yet what he simultaneously retains concerning the importance of metaphor. Specifically, Davidson denies 1) that metaphorical statements have meanings, as propositions, outside or beyond the literal meaning of the statement, and 2) that metaphors have any specific cognitive content. However, while denying these points he retains the idea that metaphors are an important part of the language of almost any discipline:

In the past those who have denied that metaphor has a cognitive content in addition to the literal have often been out to show that metaphor is confusing, merely emotive, unsuited to serious, scientific, or philosophic discourse. My views should not be associated with this tradition. Metaphor is a legitimate device not only in literature but in science, philosophy, and the law.²⁴

Though Davidson rejects the idea that metaphors have any special (figurative) meaning beyond their ordinary meaning, he does not deny that metaphors have a “point” or that they can yield insight. I think this is a crucial distinction that must be made clear in understanding Davidson’s view. In opening his essay Davidson claims that metaphors require as much creativity on the listener’s or reader’s part as on the maker of a metaphor.²⁵ And in closing he says that “many of us need help if we are to see what the author of a metaphor wanted us to see and what a more sensitive or educated reader grasps.”²⁶ What, then, is the point or the insight a metaphor provides; and what is it that the author of a metaphor wanted us to see? And how is it different from metaphorical meaning?

The distinction can be made this way. What most of the traditional theories call the figurative meaning of a metaphor Davidson claims is the *effect* of a metaphor. The

²³*Inquiries*, p. 183-198.

²⁴“What Metaphors Mean,” from *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 246.

²⁵‘WMM’, p. 245.

²⁶‘WMM’, p. 264.

creator of a metaphor gets us to notice some similarity between objects or ideas, some similarity we had not noticed before. But she does this by using words, with their ordinary meanings intact, in unfamiliar ways. For this reason Davidson believes that metaphor falls within the study of the pragmatics of a language. He says, “the common error [of the traditional views] is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself.”²⁷

So metaphors can yield insight and can definitely have a point, but not by *expressing* the insight or point. They cause us to notice some similarity but they do not, as a literal statement would, represent or explicitly pick out the similarity. This is why metaphors, from Davidson’s point of view, have the creatively satisfying or “visionary” effect they possess; they leave so much up to the listener or reader. Moreover, it is because of their specific manner and peculiar way of functioning that they cannot be paraphrased, according to Davidson. As he points out, paraphrasing is relevant to what is *said*: “we try, in paraphrase, to say it another way. But if I am right a metaphor doesn’t say anything beyond its literal meaning.”²⁸ This gives Davidson reason to compare metaphors to pictures. We do not paraphrase pictures; we describe them. Davidson would say that in interpreting a metaphor we are describing the effects it has on us, what it makes us notice.

For Davidson, then, metaphorical statements are not expressions of thoughts, and consequently are devoid of non-literal cognitive content. Yet this feature does not deport them to the periphery of language. They play a significant role in almost any discourse. It is this unique combination of properties that metaphors have under Davidson’s theory which Rorty emphasizes and upon which he expands.

2.3 Rorty and Davidson

As we move to Rorty’s use of Davidson’s account of metaphor, it may be helpful to understand this use against the background of Rorty’s interpretation of Davidson’s overall theory of meaning. A brief sketch of this background will show why Rorty thinks Davidson’s philosophy is amenable to pragmatism, and may make more perspicuous how he uses the latter’s views on metaphor.

As Rorty sees it Davidson has provided a way of breaking out of the traditional framework of understanding language as an entity, as a medium of representation between us and the world. Rorty claims that Davidson has given us “the first systematic treatment of language which breaks completely with the notion of language as something which can be adequate or inadequate to the world or to the self.”²⁹ According to Rorty the view that language is a medium of representation between us and the world is part of the more extensive traditional philosophical picture which assumes a radical distinction between knowing subject and object known. This view holds that human beings, the knowing

²⁷‘WMM’, p. 261.

²⁸‘WMM’, p. 246.

²⁹*CI&S*, p. 10.

subject, “are not simply networks of beliefs and desires but rather beings which *have* those beliefs and desires.” Further, the subject has a “core self which can look at, decide among, use, and express itself by means of such beliefs and desires.”³⁰ For Rorty the traditional picture of language as representational medium is the source of many obdurate philosophical problems, especially the realism/anti-realism dispute.³¹

Rorty credits Davidson’s rejection of the scheme-content dualism as a major step toward revising the traditional view of language and hence the self. This rejection overcomes this captivating and detrimental philosophical picture of language as a medium of representation between knowing subject and object known. He claims that this rejection parallels Dewey’s rejection of the “dualism of Subject and Object.” According to Rorty,

[b]oth pictures are of disparate ontological realms, one containing beliefs and the other non-beliefs. The picture of two such realms permits us to imagine truth as a relation between particular beliefs and particular non-beliefs which (a) is non-causal in nature, and (b) must be “correctly analysed” before one can rebut (or concede victory to) the epistemological skeptic.³²

The rejection of scheme-content dualism, along with Davidson’s holism of meaning, belief, and truth, gives us, says Rorty, a notion of beliefs as adaptations to the environment rather than as quasi-pictures.³³ Such an image of language and the self puts us outside of the realism/anti-realism dispute, which Rorty finds to be the premier twentieth-century philosophical problem. Language and belief are no longer seen as things which fit or fail to fit with the world. Davidson, says Rorty, instead lets us see them as habits of action for coping with reality.³⁴ Let’s turn now to Rorty’s specific use of Davidson’s theory of metaphor.

2.4 Rorty and Metaphor

We can begin by surveying Rorty’s interpretation of Davidson’s view of metaphor and the kinds of possibilities he believes understanding metaphor in this way opens up for philosophy. Then we can examine how these possibilities are used by Rorty in *CI&S*.

According to Rorty in his essay “Unfamiliar Noises: Hesse and Davidson on Metaphor,”³⁵ metaphors accomplish a great deal, and they do so in a way that we can neither predict nor control. But we can recognize this only if we understand metaphor, as Davidson thinks we should, to be outside the domain of semantics. Once we do we can

³⁰*CI&S*, p. 10.

³¹*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 128.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 129.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 1. For more of Rorty’s commentary on Davidson see Part II of *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, which is comprised of four chapters devoted to Davidson. See also chapter one of *Consequences of Pragmatism*, and *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), pages 259-265 and 299-305.

³⁵From *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. (Hereafter this essay will be referred to as ‘UN’.)

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. [Davidson] 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.³⁶

How does metaphor, understood through Davidson's theory, accomplish so much, according to Rorty? He explains that because metaphors have no semantic content beyond their literal meanings, they are *causes* of beliefs rather than *reasons* for beliefs³⁷. In this sense, according to Rorty, metaphors are similar to unfamiliar natural phenomena. We say of such phenomena, such as the song of a previously unknown species of bird, that it may be a "stimulus to knowledge" (a cause of a belief), but we would not say that it "conveyed knowledge" (a reason for a belief).³⁸

"Live," or fresh, metaphors, since they are causes of belief, have no place in any current pattern of justification. Being outside the realm of meaningful, cognitive discourse they do not represent thoughts; they are not propositions. However, they cause us to create propositions as we interpret them. And if a metaphor is "picked up" or becomes popular it eventually can find an established place in a language game. It becomes meaningful and crosses the line from being a cause of a belief to a reason for a belief. Once a metaphor crosses this line it becomes inactive as a metaphor. It becomes literalized and is subsequently a "dead metaphor." But Rorty stresses that there is nothing *in* the metaphor itself which causes it to become literalized. He explains this process:

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...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.³⁹

So it is not because a metaphor expresses some truth that it becomes established and part of a system of beliefs. Rather it may prove to be useful in some way and become incorporated into a language-game. That is, it may help us "cope with the world" as a new tool helps us to do so.

In *CI&S* Rorty develops these ideas further, and then systematically coordinates them within his agenda. Davidson's theory lets us see metaphors as causes of beliefs, rather than as reasons. Unlike literal statements, metaphors have no place in any pattern

³⁶'UN', p. 163.

³⁷'UN', p. 169.

³⁸'UN', p. 169.

³⁹'UN', p. 171.

of justification since they are not semantic entities. But over time they can be literalized and can take on semantic value. Davidson would likely have no problem with this assessment of his view; however, in *CI&S* Rorty extensively revises Davidson's view. This revision includes a substantial expansion of the domain of metaphor. What makes Rorty's position interesting is his claim that novel scientific and philosophical theories are metaphors, a position he derives from Davidson's definition of metaphor as unusual use of familiar words. Metaphors are often patently false or absurd sentences asserted as if they were true. And so it is with new scientific theories, as in, for example, "evolution occurs through the mechanism of natural selection." For Rorty this statement is a paradigm instance of metaphorical utterance (when it first appeared). This statement, and the larger theory it represents, was simply false, perhaps absurd, even within the field of biology, when it was first developed.

Rorty, though, blurs an important distinction Davidson believes is crucial to metaphor. In criticizing certain previous theories of metaphor, Davidson pointed out that they did not preserve the distinction between using a word metaphorically and giving a new literal use to an old word.⁴⁰ However far off the mark from Davidson's original theory he may be, Rorty's use of that theory gets its power from running over this distinction. If we include theories as metaphors we get the nonteleological view of intellectual history, including science, that Rorty wants:

To see the history of language, and thus of the arts, the sciences, and the moral sense, as the history of metaphor is to drop the picture of the human mind, or human languages, becoming better and better suited to the purposes for which God or Nature designed them, for example, able to express more and more meanings or to represent more and more facts.⁴¹

To see intellectual history this way is to understand it as a series of contingent redescriptions of the world and ourselves. Rorty finds it useful to compare cultural and intellectual change with the growth and change of the natural world. Just as evolution proceeds through *accidental* mutations which, if they are useful to the organism, are more likely to spread throughout the population, so intellectual history proceeds through accidental mutations in the form of novel metaphors. Rorty compares this view of intellectual change with the traditional views which hold that our theories and our general understanding of the world are getting better, where "better" means "closer to the truth," or understanding the world "as it really is." Whereas traditional views, for example, see "Galileo as making a discovery - finally coming up with the words which were needed to fit the world properly, words Aristotle missed - the Davidsonian sees him as having hit upon a tool which happened to work better for certain purposes than any previous tool."⁴²

But this view makes sense only if we see, as Davidson does, metaphorical expressions as devoid of any semantic content beyond the ordinary meanings of the words contained in them. And we must further see, as Rorty does, metaphors as "unfamiliar uses of noises."

⁴⁰'WMM', p. 252.

⁴¹*CI&S*, p. 16.

⁴²*CI&S*, p. 19.

Looking at intellectual history this way, according to Rorty, allows us to shift our attitudes toward science, philosophy, art, and intellectual pursuits generally, so that these pursuits are better integrated with one another, and so that they better fit our immediate needs. Rather than seeing them as worthy or unworthy based on whether they “correspond to reality,” or are validly deduced from first principles, and so forth, we should evaluate them on their practicability, their usefulness. Ideas and theories are, as Rorty sees it, better understood as instruments for action, rather than discoveries about “what’s really in the world.”

As Rorty interprets it, Davidson’s theory of metaphor gives us an account of language which is quite agreeable to these goals of pragmatism. We can now understand ourselves, our theories about the world, and our polity in a way that is not tied to the church of fixed concepts and meanings. If we understand metaphor to be outside the domain of semantics, and if so much of language is metaphorical, then, according to Rorty, we can pry ourselves away from that last remaining bits of essentialism in our science and philosophy.

CHAPTER THREE: MAX BLACK'S AND DAVIDSON'S VIEWS ON METAPHOR

This chapter will cover in some detail both Max Black's and Davidson's views on metaphor. Black's view is important for several reasons. Black gave the first systematic treatment of metaphor within analytic philosophy, and he was the first to consider metaphor as a vital part of most, including philosophical, discourse. Previously, philosophers thought of metaphor as inveigling and dangerous at worst, and as inessential and mere stylistic decoration at best, always to be avoided wherever possible in serious philosophical writing. As Black puts it, analytic philosophers operate under the principle that "whereof one can speak only metaphorically, thereof one ought not to speak at all."⁴³

Black agrees that metaphors are "dangerous - and perhaps especially so in philosophy," but seems to feel that they can be tamed with the proper analysis.⁴⁴ However, he does not agree that they are *merely* decorative and inessential. It is one of the groundbreaking features of his essay that he held metaphors, "good" metaphors, to possess significant cognitive content. He feels that metaphors have cognitive content over and above even the best literal paraphrase, which "inevitably says too much - and with the wrong emphasis." And, importantly, paraphrase "fails to give the insight that the metaphor did."⁴⁵ So, for Black metaphorical expressions have special meanings, in the sense that they contain more meaning than the literal meanings of their constituent words, and more meaning than any literal paraphrase can capture. I will return to this topic at the end of the next section.

All of this is important to my purposes in the following ways. First, it is against Black's theory of metaphor, and theories like it, which Davidson is reacting, since Davidson denies the thesis of metaphorical meaning, and the claim that metaphors have cognitive content. Second, if an account of metaphor like Black's is correct, and metaphorical expressions do indeed have semantic and cognitive content above the literal meanings of the words in them, then Rorty's claims about cultural development cannot be right. Let's now turn to the details of Black's theory of how metaphors work.

3.1 Black's view

Black's goal is to answer some questions about the "logical grammar" of metaphor.⁴⁶ His essay begins with some general considerations about what counts as metaphor versus, for example, allegory or some other type of trope. He then provides a way to analyze the structure of metaphorical expressions, separating the elements of the expression into what he terms the *focus* and *frame*. The focus of a metaphor is the word that is being used, we may say, in a figurative or unconventional way within a context of words whose occurrence is ordinary; this context is the frame of a metaphorical

⁴³"Metaphor", from his *Models and Metaphors*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962, p. 25.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 25.

expression. Black uses as an example the expression, “The chairman plowed through the meeting.” Here the occurrence of the word “plowed” is figurative and it is the focus of the metaphor, while the remainder of the sentence acts as the frame.⁴⁷

With this method of analysis in hand he goes on to critique several popular accounts of metaphor, found mainly in works of literary criticism and rhetoric, and to develop his own view, which is a modification of an existing account, the *interaction view*. Black first considers what he calls the *substitution view* of metaphor, which simply holds that “a metaphorical expression is used in place of some equivalent literal expression.”⁴⁸ The crucial phrase in this view is ‘*equivalent literal expression.*’ Because Black maintains that many metaphors have a cognitive content that is beyond any literal paraphrase, this view must be rejected.

The second view Black evaluates he calls the comparison view, and considers it to be a variant of the substitution view. It is rejected on similar grounds. Writers who hold a comparison view claim that the function of a metaphor is to invoke a similarity or analogy between two or more ideas, or facts, or objects. The view cashes out this function by reducing metaphor to the status of elliptical simile. The only difference, according to this view, between simile and metaphor is “presentation,” and the two figures really express the same ideas. The comparison a metaphor indirectly asks us to notice (for example in, “A novel is a great galumphing whale”), is that which a simile makes explicit (“A novel is *like* a great galumphing whale”). Black will have no truck with this view because it reduces metaphor to something else: “Metaphorical statement is not a substitute for a formal comparison or any other kind of literal statement, but has its own distinctive capacities and achievements.”⁴⁹

The final account of metaphor Black considers and ultimately defends and modifies, he terms the *interaction view*. Significantly, this view preserves the idea that metaphors have cognitive content that cannot be expressed by any literal translation. The view holds that the words in a metaphorical expression interact with one another “to produce a meaning that is a resultant of that interaction.”⁵⁰ Black analyzes this interaction as one between the frame and focus of the metaphor where the former, by providing a unique context for the focus, imposes an “extension of the meaning upon the focal word.” The focal word “obtains a *new meaning*” from this interaction.⁵¹ So, for example, in the expression “the chairman plowed through the meeting,” the word “plowed” takes on a meaning beyond any given by a dictionary entry.

Black goes on to analyze this interaction in some detail, creating more technical terms and metaphors along the way. He says that a metaphor acts as a filter. Given a metaphor like, “Man is a wolf,” we can identify two subjects in it, the principle subject,

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 28.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 31.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 37.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 38.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 39, (italics added).

Man, and the subsidiary subject, Wolf. Black claims that in this example, as in many metaphors, the subsidiary subject will influence how we “see” the principle subject by filtering certain ideas about Man through our ideas about wolves. These ideas (about men and wolves) he calls the *system of associated commonplaces*. These are sets of “standard beliefs” and “current platitudes” that are the common possession of the members of some speech community about some given topic. So the associated commonplaces of the principle subject (which is usually contained in the frame of the metaphorical expression) is “seen through” the filter of the subsidiary subject (the focus) which “organizes” how we see and understand the principle subject. In the “Man is a wolf” metaphor, then, certain ideas we have about wolves (their ferocity, their status as beasts of prey, etc.) will be projected onto our understanding of Man, but not in a haphazard way. Black calls his view interactionist because the associated commonplaces of the principle subject (Man) will determine which commonplaces of the subsidiary subject can be attributed to the former: “Any human traits that can without undue strain be talked about in ‘wolf-language’ will be rendered prominent, and any that cannot will be pushed into the background.”⁵²

Let’s return to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter about the issue of metaphorical meaning and Black’s view, but let us add two more. There are four related yet distinct questions about this issue that are relevant to my immediate concerns. They are: (1) does Black claim that certain words within a metaphorical expression or context take on new or extended meanings?; (2) does he hold that metaphorical expressions as a whole have meaning, beyond their literal meaning?; (3) does Black maintain that a metaphor maker says something beyond the literal meanings of the words in the expression; and (4) does he claim that a metaphor states a proposition which can be either true or false?

Answers to these questions, albeit not precise ones, are more clearly given in a second article on metaphor by Black,⁵³ and in third article which stands as a reply Black wrote to Davidson’s view.⁵⁴ Concerning the first question, whether certain words in a metaphor take on new meanings, he states they do not, if what is meant is that they acquire a new “standard dictionary sense.”⁵⁵ This is of course a reasonable claim. He said in his original article that the focal word takes on an extended meaning through its interaction with the meanings of the words in the frame. So must we assume that they at least acquire a “temporary” new meaning within the context of a metaphorical expression? Here Black is somewhat evasive. He says

The question to be considered, then, is not the idle one of whether the words used in a metaphorical remark astonishingly acquire some permanently new sense but rather the question whether the metaphor maker is *attaching* an altered sense to the words he is using in context.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 40-41.

⁵³“More About Metaphor”, *Dialectica* 31 (1977): 431-457.

⁵⁴“How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson”, from *On Metaphor*, Sheldon Sacks, ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 187.

Did [Wallace] Stevens mean by “pheasant” [by calling a poem a pheasant] something having a tail and able to fly, thereby committing himself to the absurd idea that a poem literally *is* a bird? Or was he rather using his remark to *say* something about poetry?⁵⁶

Black of course answers that the latter is the case. But what does it mean to say that a metaphor maker “attaches an altered sense” to a word? This happens simply by putting a word in a metaphorical context. This is further clarified in “More About Metaphor.”

In Metaphor, I said - to the scandal of some of my subsequent critics - that the imputed interaction involves “shifts in meaning of words belonging to the same family or system as the metaphorical question” (45). I meant, of course, a shift in the *speaker’s* meaning - and the corresponding *hearer’s* meaning - what both of them understand by the words, as used on the particular occasion.⁵⁷

So the words in a metaphor do take on extended meanings, but only at the level of speaker meaning. Now, skipping ahead to question (3), do metaphor makers say something (beyond the literal meanings of their words) by making a metaphor, we see that the passages above give a clear affirmative answer to that.

Question (2) asks whether metaphorical expressions as a whole, on Black’s view, have a figurative or metaphorical meaning distinct from the literal meaning of the expression. The answer to this is clearly yes, for this is just what Black’s view of metaphor is about, the structure of figurative meaning. But although Black gives us a very clear account of how words interact with one another to produce new meanings, it’s difficult to locate that meaning, even in the realm of “speaker’s” and “hearer’s” meaning. The full meaning cannot consist of the literal paraphrase or interpretation, because Black says this does not capture the original “insight” the metaphor gave us.⁵⁸ This additional insight simply “resides in” the metaphor itself, or in understanding the metaphor, but Black never gives us a clear explication of what exactly that is.

Finally to question (4), does a metaphor state a proposition which can be either true or false? Black is explicitly evasive on this point. In a footnote he says, “I shall not discuss here the vexed question whether metaphors can be true or false.”⁵⁹ However, in the text Black does say that a reader could “disagree” with a writer’s metaphor, and that “reasons could be offered for and against” a metaphor. In a footnote to *these* claims Black remarks that, “The truth of [these assertions] supports my own view that metaphors can *imply* truth-claims.”⁶⁰ What he means by this seems to be simply that although he is unsure if “Man is a wolf” makes a claim which is in fact either true or false, he is certain that it implies statements, such as “Man is ferocious,” which are either true or false.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 188 (italics original).

⁵⁷ “More About Metaphor”, p. 443.

⁵⁸“Metaphor”, p. 46.

⁵⁹Ibid., n. 20, p. 184.

⁶⁰Ibid., n. 19, p. 184 (italics added).

So Black has given us a clearly semantic interpretation of how metaphors work: Key words in a metaphorical expression interact to produce a definite idea or insight. Let's turn then to Davidson's very non-semantic account of metaphor.

3.2 Davidson's "What Metaphors Mean"

The bulk of Davidson's paper is devoted to criticizing semantic accounts such as Black's; indeed, most of the criticisms are specifically aimed at Black. As we have seen in chapter one, Davidson's positive view of metaphor, which is given in a very sketchy form, is that metaphor is an imaginative use of language whose intended effect is to make us notice likenesses.

In the first several pages of the essay one can identify at least four separate but related claims (and perhaps some of the claims are at root identical) which Davidson makes against semantic theories of metaphor: (1) metaphors, or metaphorical expressions, do not say anything beyond the literal meanings of their words, nor do metaphor makers say anything beyond the literal meanings of the words they use;⁶¹ (2) metaphors do not have a "special," "second," or figurative meaning;⁶² (3) metaphors do not "convey ideas" or have "cognitive content" (beyond that expressed by the literal meanings of the words used);⁶³ and (4) there are no rules for making or interpreting metaphors.⁶⁴

It seems that for Davidson the central claim in this batch is (2) because much of the article is aimed at exposing it as false, and because some of the other claims appear to turn on it. What Davidson is specifically arguing against in (2) is the notion that a word or words in a metaphor take on a special or extended meaning. So, in an example he uses, "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters," we are to believe, by semantic accounts of metaphor, that the word "face" takes on, in addition to its usual extension, water. Likewise in "Tolstoy was a great moralizing infant" the word "infant" refers to the great Russian novelist.

But Davidson quickly pounces on this idea, saying, "[t]his account cannot...be complete, for if in these contexts the words 'face' and 'infant' apply correctly to waters and to the adult Tolstoy, then waters really do have faces and Tolstoy literally was an infant, and all sense of metaphor evaporates."⁶⁵ Davidson goes on to revise this basic semantic account to see if modifications would make of it a workable theory. Perhaps, he conjectures, metaphor is a form of ambiguity, and as the key word in a metaphorical utterance (the word being used metaphorically, Black's *focus*) takes on its new meaning we waver back and forth between the old and new meanings. But he says this cannot be

⁶¹'WMM', p. 246.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴'WMM', p. 245.

⁶⁵'WMM', p. 248.

right, because with words used in ambiguous ways (creatively ambiguous, as in a pun) we hesitate over its meaning in a way we do not with metaphor.⁶⁶

He then offers as a possibility the idea that the second, or figurative, meaning of a metaphor is attached to its literal meaning in a rule-like way, as in the fashion of Frege's account of oblique contexts. But Davidson says this account will fail in the way all such accounts which posit a second, figurative meaning must eventually fail: they do not preserve the distinction between using an old word in a new literal way and using a word metaphorically.⁶⁷ Davidson makes his point by asking us to imagine ourselves teaching a visitor from Saturn to use the word "floor." We lead him from floor to floor pointing to the examples and repeating the word, and we "prompt him to make experiments, tapping objects tentatively with his tentacle while rewarding his right and wrong tries." We want him to be able to identify not only the present samples of floors, but also any floor that may come his way, so that he can talk about different floors, convey information about them and so on. Davidson points out that here we have made an important distinction, that between learning the meaning of a word and using the word once it is learned.

Now our Saturnian friend transports us back to his home planet and we look back at earth, nod at it, and say to our friend, 'floor.' Davidson says that perhaps, then, our friend will think this is still part of the lesson and assume that the word 'floor' applies properly to the earth, at least as seen from Saturn.

But what if you thought he already knew the meaning of 'floor,' and you were remembering how Dante, from a similar place in the heavens, saw the inhabited earth as 'the small round floor that makes us passionate.' Your purpose was metaphor, not drill in the use of language.⁶⁸

Davidson asks what difference it would make to the Saturnian which way he took it, and answers that under any account of metaphor which posits second or figurative meanings, it would make very little difference at all. For according to that theory, "a word has a new meaning in a metaphorical context; the occasion of the metaphor would, therefore, be the occasion for learning the new meaning."⁶⁹ Davidson concludes, then, that such a theory cannot be correct. When we learn a new literal use for a word we are learning something about language, about the meaning of that word. When we make a metaphor we may be using a word in a new way, but we are not thereby learning a new meaning for that word.

We can see how Davidson's attack on figurative meanings fits with the rest of his theory of language and linguistic meaning. Since Davidson identifies meaning with truth-conditions, those conditions in the world under which a speaker would assent to the truth of a sentence, there can only be, under his theory, one *kind* of meaning. There can, however, be different attitudes speakers have toward sentences, and this is why Davidson maintains that metaphor is relevant to pragmatics. This is also why he compares making a

⁶⁶'WMM', p. 249.

⁶⁷'WMM', p. 252. This distinction, not incidentally, is the one Rorty dissolves in his augmented spectrum of what gets called metaphorical. This move will be criticized in Chapter Four.

⁶⁸'WMM', p. 251.

⁶⁹Ibid.

metaphor to lying, asserting, hinting, promising, criticizing, and so on; it is a matter of using words in a certain way. A sentence can be used to tell a lie, to assert something, or to make a metaphor without a change in meaning of the sentence across these different uses. Davidson points out, for example, that a woman who believed in witches but did not believe her neighbor to be one may say, “She’s a witch,” and mean it metaphorically; or she could, believing the same of her neighbor and witches, say the same thing and intend to deceive the local authorities into prosecuting the neighbor. In either case the meaning of the sentence is the same, only the use has changed.⁷⁰

So Davidson concludes that if the words in a metaphorical utterance do not have any meaning in addition to their literal meaning, then metaphors and metaphor makers do not *say* anything beyond the literal meaning of the utterance. But Davidson concedes that he can imagine someone granting all of this but shrugging it off as “no more than an insistence on restraint in using the word ‘meaning.’” He claims, however, that part of the semantic theory of metaphor, and stateable independently, is the thesis that associated with a metaphor is a definite cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message. This theory is false as a full account of metaphor, whether or not we call the purported cognitive content a meaning.⁷¹

Davidson’s rejection of this idea that metaphors have a special cognitive content is grounded mainly in positive claims about metaphor, about how metaphors work. He says the difficulty of interpreting metaphors, of identifying exactly what the alleged cognitive content is, should make us suspicious of claims about cognitive content altogether. What we are really doing when we interpret a metaphor is not sorting out meaning or cognitive content, we are “focusing on what the metaphor makes us notice.”⁷² And what it makes us notice is not propositional in character.

Davidson relies heavily on the language of perception in describing what he calls the *effects* of metaphor, a notion he finds more apt and which he substitutes for “meaning.” He says that metaphor makes us “see” one thing as another, and he points out that metaphors cannot be paraphrased because “seeing as is not seeing that.”⁷³ When we interpret metaphors we are attempting to characterize the “vision” they provoke. This is the role of the critic, who does not restate or paraphrase the metaphor (as these are activities relevant to meaningful utterances) but who helps us, if we need help, “to *see* what the author of a metaphor wanted us to *see*.”⁷⁴

It is evident that Davidson puts nearly as much creative emphasis on the interpretation as on the making of metaphors, and he makes this point explicit in the opening paragraph of his essay. This is a significant point of contrast between Davidson’s theory and semantic theories such as Black’s. As we saw earlier in this chapter, according

⁷⁰‘WMM’, p. 258.

⁷¹‘WMM’, p. 262.

⁷²Ibid.

⁷³‘WMM’, p. 263.

⁷⁴‘WMM’, p. 264.

to Black there are specific, identifiable semantic interactions between words in a metaphor, and because of this interaction a metaphor has a specific cognitive content and meaning. Although Black agrees with Davidson that often metaphors cannot be paraphrased, he believes the reason for this is that the insight and meaning they yield is diminished when translated into a set of “equivalent” literal statements. Nevertheless, the meaning is there in the metaphor and is “objective.” That is, though interpreters may disagree over which of a number of possible interpretations is correct, one interpretation is more correct than others, and there is a definite thought or message being conveyed.

Davidson, in denying just this, and by enlisting the interpreter as an equal creative partner with the metaphor maker, determines the audience to be the source of life for the metaphor. Whatever “message” we find in a metaphor is put there by the audience. This is exactly the kind of leverage Rorty needs to pry away positivistic conceptions of language as something which shapes itself around the contours of the physical world, which represents states of affairs.

CHAPTER FOUR: METAPHORICAL MEANING

Davidson's claims about metaphors -- that they have no meaning beyond their literal meaning, that they have no cognitive content (beyond what is in the literal utterance), that metaphors and metaphor makers say nothing (beyond the literal meanings of their utterances) -- are startling and counter-intuitive. I think there may be some truth to what Davidson says, but only for a certain range or class of metaphors; for another class I think we can say that they do have meaning and that their makers say something beyond the literal in uttering them. Moreover, the metaphors in this second class can be understood to have meaning within the Davidsonian framework of formal semantics. These we may call *low-level* metaphors. Low-level metaphors are those which lie in a rich contextual environment and have minimal suggestiveness, or as Black says, those which do not support a "high degree of implicative elaboration."⁷⁵ An example of a low-level metaphor would be "The chairman plowed through the meeting." On the other hand, examples of a high-level metaphor may be "Architecture is frozen music," or "Eloquence is the painting of thought." These metaphors, especially outside of a lot of context, are highly suggestive and somewhat difficult to interpret.⁷⁶

Davidson's view of metaphor may be appropriate to high-level metaphors for the following reason. Davidson claims that what a metaphor makes us "notice or see is not, in general, propositional in character."⁷⁷ This is certainly more true of high than low-level metaphors. For example, upon hearing "Death's a sad bone," (Anne Sexton) or "Eloquence is the painting of thought" (Pascal) we might hesitate over assigning definite propositional content to these metaphors. In these cases Davidson's remark that metaphor is a matter of "seeing *as*" and not "seeing *that*" seems more plausible. There is nearly no end to the ideas that these metaphors prompt in the hearer. And for these examples paraphrase (saying the same thing another way) does seem inappropriate.

None of this, however, seems to be quite right about low-level metaphors. These metaphors tend to have an immediately graspable content. Part of the reason may be that the things being compared have evident similarities. But I think that what makes many low-level metaphors easy to understand and paraphrase is that they are often surrounded

⁷⁵"More About Metaphor", p. 440.

⁷⁶It is important to note that there is also a distinction between low-level and *dead* metaphors; however, it is not obvious exactly where the line between them should be drawn. The category of dead metaphors clearly includes expressions or words whose meanings are "officially" literal (perhaps sanctioned by a dictionary entry), but whose metaphorical ancestry is still visible. "She is a *bright* student", "I was *struck* by his effrontery", and "The *mouth* of the river" are uncontroversial examples of dead metaphors.

But what about "I could feel the *electricity* between us", or "He's a real *live wire*"? Are they dead metaphors or barely living low-level metaphors? At one point Davidson says that to be a metaphor it is necessary that the sentence is taken to be literally false (p. 257). He also says that a live metaphor draws our attention to some likeness between objects (pp. 252, 261). Surely "He's a live wire" no longer directs our attention between certain human personality traits and exposed electrical current. But nor would anyone take such a sentence to be literally true. Davidson needs to either revise his criteria or create a third category of, perhaps, moribund metaphors.

⁷⁷'WMM', p. 263.

by context. The role of context is so important that it can turn high-level metaphors into low-level ones. Consider the high-level metaphor “Everyone is a moon.” Its meaning is unclear. Now consider it within the context of a discussion about human psychology, accompanied by remarks about everyone having a dark and mysterious unrevealed side of their personality. Now the meaning is more clear. I maintain that (at least) low-level metaphors have semantic import, and that the context in which such a metaphor occurs significantly contributes to fixing the meaning of the metaphor.

I will go on in Chapter Four to claim that if low-level metaphors can be understood as being semantically significant, then *a fortiori* the metaphors Rorty identifies as the locus of the contingency of cultural change also have stable semantic import. The metaphors Rorty identifies are usually embedded in a rich context which includes much auxiliary explanation.

4.1 Davidson and Low-level Metaphors

The appropriate first step is to justify the claim that what Davidson says about metaphor, at least about a certain class of metaphors, seems counter-intuitive and even wrong. Then I want to point out why I think that the issue of metaphor is a site of tension within Davidson’s theory of meaning by highlighting those features of the theory which seem to encourage a semantic account of metaphor and those features which discourage it. I will present a more thorough exposition of Davidson’s theory of meaning than the one given in Chapter One and point out those features of it which are incompatible with the notion of metaphorical meaning. I believe it is these features which motivate Davidson’s rejection of metaphorical meaning and which motivate his positive theory of meaning. I will then attempt to show that Davidson has stronger reasons for adjusting his theory of meaning to include metaphorical meaning. These reasons come from two of his guiding principles of theory construction, the principle of charity and the idea that a semantic theory should be empirical. Therefore, my criticisms of Davidson are primarily internal ones; the central charge is that Davidson’s view of metaphor is inconsistent with his principles of theory construction and must be revised. At the end of the chapter I will suggest how such a revision might go.

It cannot be disputed that Davidson’s theory of metaphor clashes with the prevailing historical opinion of philosophers and rhetoricians that a metaphor is something which has a meaning separate from its literal meaning. Although contemporary opinion includes some agreement with Davidson, most of the literature on

his view is composed of earnest dissent.⁷⁸ The reason why so many writers disagree with Davidson is that we seem to *communicate* effectively with metaphors everyday. As Davidson himself says, we use them not only in literature, “but in science, philosophy, and the law.”⁷⁹ For example, in philosophy there are several metaphors that come easily to mind which are used to discuss the merits of arguments: “Carefully follow the *thread* of the argument,” “Follow the path of the argument,” “His argument doesn’t hold water,” and “Her argument has holes in it.” And “The problem of causation has outwitted many of the best philosophers in the Western tradition,” is an example of the metaphoric personification of philosophic problems.

Here are other metaphors we can imagine encountering in print or in conversation, and, given suitable context, we would probably have little trouble in understanding the writer or speaker: “The mechanic performed surgery on the carburetor of my car,” “A new small business is often a fragile craft launched upon a stormy sea,” “This particular critic writes with a very lethal pen,” “Said the economist, ‘Ford, IBM, U.S. Steel; in the business world these are the Great Sequoias.’” Or consider the following uses of metaphor found in the *New York Times*: “I am the beneficiary of a lucky break in the genetic sweepstakes,” Isaac Asimov, quoted in his obituary, April 7, 1992; “Bill Clinton...a pinball moving back and forth to the pressures of external events without an internal gyroscope to guide him,” James Pinkerton, June 6, 1993; “Many Americans have accepted that the economy is an alligator and Mr. Bush is no alligator wrestler,” Anna Quindlen, Sept. 16, 1992.

Perhaps none of the examples above are very interesting metaphors, and most may not be extremely fresh or novel. But most of them, I think, are safely within the bounds of genuine metaphor, not yet hardened into literalness, though perhaps some are familiar enough to be idioms rather than full-fledged metaphors. Nevertheless, we have here some utterances which the man in the street would likely identify as metaphorical and as instances of *successful communication*. And we want to say that what is communicated is something, some meaning or idea, that exceeds the literal meaning of the utterances. Davidson, however, denies that this happens and excludes figurative meaning from his general theory of meaning and linguistic behavior. He denies that metaphor is “a form of communication” or “primarily a vehicle for conveying ideas,” and he denies that a speaker of a metaphor says anything beyond the literal.⁸⁰ But this, as Frank Farrell points out,⁸¹

⁷⁸For samples of varying degrees of agreement, see Stephen Davies, “Truth-values and Metaphors”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 43 (1984), pp. 291-302; and Ehud Rahat, “Metaphors and Malapropisms: Davidson on the Limits of the Literal”, *Philosophia*, 21 no. 3-4 (1992), pp. 311-327. For varying degrees of disagreement see Mary Hesse, “Tropical Talk: The Myth of the Literal”, *Aristotelian Society Supplement*, 61 (1987), pp. 297-311; Josef Stern, “What Metaphors Do Not Mean”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 16 (1991), pp. 13-52; Thomas Leddy, “Davidson’s Rejection of Metaphorical Meaning”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 16 (1983), pp. 62-78; Jonathan Berg, “Metaphor, Meaning, and Interpretation”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 12 (1988), pp. 695-709.

⁷⁹‘WMM’, p. 246.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹“Metaphor and Davidsonian Theories of Meaning”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 17, no. 3 (1987), p. 631.

seems odd given that Davidson emphasizes the empirical character of his semantic theory.⁸² Farrell maintains that if a theory claims an empirical status and further claims to give an accurate account of linguistic behavior,

[t]hen the principal constraint governing inclusion within the subject matter of the theory will be whether or not speakers in a linguistic community themselves assign semantic properties to the sort of sentence in question...It will not matter that the sentence is one which the available philosophical models do not handle well. If our theory has a genuine empirical commitment, we will adjust our models to the data instead of excluding those sentences which are, from the philosopher's established perspective, deviant ones.⁸³

The idea is that we use metaphors as if they had meaning beyond the literal, as if they had cognitive content, as if they express something beyond their literal content, and as if the speaker meant and said something beyond the literal. In the above metaphor about Bill Clinton we must assume that any educated and informed reader would take James Pinkerton to be *saying* or *meaning*, by using the words he did, that Bill Clinton has no convictions of his own and merely responds to the wants of others in order to fulfill his own desire to be liked, or something like that. Farrell's point is that if you want to give an account of meaning, of how people communicate and understand one another, and if you want your theory to be empirically responsible, then you must include among your data those sentences which people generally hold to be meaningful, even if the meaning is figurative.

However, it is possible that this simply begs the question of metaphorical meaning from Davidson's perspective, and from Rorty's. Though our pre-theoretic intuitions about metaphor may in fact incline us to assign them figurative meaning, and even use them as if they had such meaning, these intuitions could be mistaken. Davidson's aim in constructing a theory of meaning is to reveal what we as speakers and hearers must know, even if implicitly, in order for us to understand one another. Davidson believes his theory reveals that metaphorical meaning has no role in how we actually do understand each other. I think Rorty would oppose Farrell's argument because it is the results of Davidson's claims about metaphor which he uses to undermine our assumptions about what is meaningful and the progress of culture vis-à-vis the existence of this meaning. If Farrell claims that a theory of meaning should make room for metaphorical meaning because people generally believe there is such a thing, then from Rorty's point of view so much the worse for these beliefs: Davidson's argument shows we were wrong.

What we need, then, is an argument to buttress our intuitions about metaphorical meaning. We need a more compelling reason why Davidson should accept metaphorical

⁸²This is a central point in Davidson's work on language and it is stressed repeatedly. Its classic characterization can be found in "Truth and Meaning" (*Inquiries*) on p. 24: "A theory of meaning (in my mildly perverse sense) is an empirical theory, and its ambition is to account for the workings of a natural language."

⁸³Farrell, *op. cit.*

meaning into the realm of the semantic phenomena under study. We need to show that metaphors are semantically relevant, that speakers do *say* and *mean* something when they use metaphors, and that successful communication depends on metaphors being construed this way. It will be in Davidson's general strategy for constructing a theory of meaning that we will find compelling reasons for treating metaphor as a semantic issue.

4.2 A Closer Look at Davidson's Semantic Program

Interestingly, if we look closer at Davidson's theory of meaning we find that it may be the empirical constraint on his theory which motivates both rejection and inclusion of metaphorical meaning, although some formal constraints also play a hand in excluding metaphorical meaning. In taking this closer look it will also be useful to connect what we find with the arguments against metaphorical meaning found in "What Metaphors Mean." I think there may be good reason to believe, as Farrell does, that Davidson says what he does about metaphor because metaphor acts as a wrench thrown into his semantic theory. After this excursion we can return to the question of what Davidson can legitimately exclude from the data set and perhaps rescue our intuitions about metaphorical meaning.

I have one more comment, though, on Farrell's point about what should be included in the subject matter of a theory of meaning. He says that such decisions should turn on whether or not the speakers themselves "assign semantic properties to the sort of sentence in question." So the issue here is the beliefs speakers have *about* what is or is not meaningful. But this does not quite reach what is important in a semantic theory like Davidson's. For one thing, we have seen that Davidson (and Rorty) could claim that these are pre-theoretic beliefs speakers have and such beliefs may be mistaken. But there is a distinction to be made between (1) beliefs *about* a class (or "sort", as Farrell says) of sentences, and (2) the beliefs *at work within* these sentences. That is, (1) is just the general belief that metaphors are meaningful beyond the literal. The kind of beliefs in (2) are those that a speaker thinks (contra Davidson) she is expressing by uttering the metaphor. She may believe, for example, that Hollywood movie producers shamelessly take advantage of aspiring actresses. And she may wish to express this belief by uttering, "Hollywood movie producers are weasels." I think it is this second kind of belief which Davidson should be concerned about, given that his theory is one which claims that the connection between belief and meaning is important. This issue will arise again in Section 3.4, which deals with the notion of metaphorical truth. Let's turn, then, to a more detailed account of Davidson's semantic program. We will see that while Davidson's theory of meaning as it stands is incompatible with metaphorical meaning, his rejection of metaphorical meaning is inconsistent with his principles of theory construction.

In the very brief exposition of Davidson's theory of meaning in Chapter One we saw that he is out to give a theory of meaning guided by the principles of radical interpretation, the principle of charity, and a principle of holism between meaning, truth, and belief. Davidson believes that a theory of meaning is essentially a theory of interpretation for some given language, the object language, and a theory of interpretation can be put in the form of a Tarski-like theory of truth, which will appear in the

metalanguage.⁸⁴ For Davidson, as we saw, to give the meaning of an utterance is to pair it up with its truth-conditions, and Tarski's theory of truth gives us a formal procedure for doing this. The theory says that "for each sentence *s*, a statement of the form '*s* is true if and only if *p*' where in the simplest case '*p*' is replaced by *s*."⁸⁵ So in the model form of what are called *T-sentences*, *s* is a sentence of the object language and *p*, which states the truth-conditions, is either *s* if the object language is contained in the metalanguage, or is a translation of *s*.

A further ingredient in the theory is the assumption that the language has a finite number of logical constants and words. The theory is then recursive and will entail an appropriate T-sentence for each sentence in the object language, providing an infinite list of interpreted new sentences.⁸⁶ But as Davidson says, the T-sentences do not determine the meaning of *s* by pretending synonymy, "but by adding one more brush-stroke to the picture which, *taken as a whole*, tells what there is to know of the meaning of *s*."⁸⁷ This is another aspect of Davidson's holism; we learn the meanings of the sentences by recognizing a pattern from among the utterances to which a speaker assents. Then, given enough T-sentences, we can abstract out of this list the meanings of the individual words and the rules for combining them.

Now we can begin to see why such a theory, as it stands, cannot treat metaphorical sentences as having a meaning distinct from their literal meaning. Davidson's theory of meaning when applied to some particular language is supposed to give us the meaning-structure, or logical form, of that language. Because the theory aims to show the conditions necessary to interpret and understand a language, it must account for the fact that language users can understand a potential infinity of novel sentences based on knowledge of a finite list of words and axioms or rules for combining them to make these new sentences: "[t]here is no escape from the need to treat the semantic features of the items of the potential infinity of sentences as owed to the semantic features of the items in a finite vocabulary."⁸⁸ This is one reason why Davidson finds Tarski's truth-theory so friendly to the tasks of meaning-theory; it allows you to recursively build an infinite list from a finite one. But this is only possible if we can give the logical form for each sentence of the object language in such a way that the sentences all fit together, including the proper logical relations *among* these sentences. "To give the logical form of a sentence is to give its logical location in the totality of sentences, to describe it in a way that explicitly determines what sentences it entails and what sentences it is entailed by."⁸⁹

⁸⁴See Alfred Tarski, "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages", in *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1956).

⁸⁵"Semantics for Natural Languages", from *Inquiries*, p. 60.

⁸⁶"Radical Interpretation", *Ibid.*, p. 130

⁸⁷"Truth and Meaning", *Ibid.*, p. 26 (italics added).

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁸⁹"The Logical Form of Action Sentences", from *Essays on Actions and Events*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1980), p. 140.

So for Davidson's system to work sentences cannot vary in meaning from one context to another, as would be the case if metaphorical sentences were treated as having a meaning beyond the literal. Of course in natural languages it is necessary that the meaning of a sentence vary in the case of indexicals, but Davidson claims, rightly, that these can easily be handled by relativizing the sentence to speaker, place and time. For example, the utterance "I am tired" is put into a T-sentence such as, " 'I am tired' is true as (potentially) spoken by p at t if and only if p is tired at t ."⁹⁰ But generally it is in the interests of such a theory to account for meaning in a way that is as context-free as possible. If we could legitimately assign a metaphorical meaning to a sentence, then that sentence could have different truth-values on different readings, depending on whether we took the sentence literally or metaphorically.

Now if the truth-value of a sentence could shift in different contexts, as would be the case if we allowed metaphorical meaning, then the task of accounting for the logical relations between sentences is much burdened. It would also be difficult to give an adequate formal account of the extensions of predicates and other terms. The result would be a totality of T-sentences which is inconsistent, giving some sentence at one time certain truth-conditions, and giving it different truth-conditions at another. What is really at stake for Davidson concerning metaphorical meaning, then, is the very large wrinkle it would put in system of using a Tarski-like truth theory for a theory of meaning. Davidson does not, probably with good reason, go into this in 'WMM.' After all it is not very persuasive to be told that "X cannot be meaningful because it does not fit into my theory of meaning." However, there are, as there should be, some salient connections between his arguments against metaphorical meaning in 'WMM' and his general theory of meaning.

For example one of the most important arguments 'WMM' holds is that if metaphors had a meaning beyond the literal, then we could not distinguish the metaphorical use of a word and the act of learning a new literal meaning for it. This argument (which we discussed in Chapter Two) is built around the thought experiment which involves teaching a visitor from Saturn the meaning of the word "floor." Of course the problem vanishes once we drop the idea of metaphors having meaning apart from the literal meanings of their words, or of metaphor users saying anything beyond the literal.

4.3 Metaphorical Meaning and Davidson's Principles of Theory Construction

Let us return to the issue of empirical constraints. I said above that such constraints may at once be a reason to both include and exclude metaphorical meaning from a theory of meaning. I want for a moment to focus on why for Davidson empirical constraints may be a reason for excluding metaphorical meaning. This has to do with the nature of the T-sentences. Again, the T-sentences pair a sentence of the object language (on the left of the biconditional) with the necessary and sufficient conditions (appearing on the right hand side) for the truth of that sentence. The truth-conditions "give the meaning" of the object language sentences and are effectively translations of these

⁹⁰"Truth and Meaning", *Inquiries*, p. 34-35.

sentences. Davidson claims that if the theory is to be empirical and therefore testable, then the T-sentences must be treated as theorems; and as such they are to be further treated as law-like, as “empirical generalizations about speakers.”⁹¹ Davidson puts the point this way in the introduction to *Inquiries*.

So a theorem like “ ‘Schnee ist weiss’ is true in the mouth of a German speaker if and only if snow is white” has to be taken not merely as true, but as capable of supporting counterfactual claims. Indeed, given that the evidence for this law, if it is one, depends ultimately on certain causal relations between speakers and the world, one can say that it is no accident that “Schnee ist weiss” is true if and only if snow is white; it is the whiteness of snow that *makes* “Schnee ist weiss” true.⁹²

Some writers have significantly missed the point of the claim that T-sentences have a law-like status. For example, in a chapter on Davidson from their *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide*, Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore state that T-sentences cannot be laws because of the arbitrary way words come to signify or represent their objects.

T-sentences aren’t laws. How could they be, compatible with the conventionality of language? The thought that language is conventional *just is* the thought that it can’t be a law that a formula means what it does.⁹³

In a footnote Fodor and Lepore say by “conventional” they mean that it is arbitrary how “languages pair truth conditions with morpho-syntactic forms.”⁹⁴ But Davidson is not denying the arbitrariness of the connection between the words themselves and what they designate. That connection is constantly subject to change across speakers, as Davidson points out in an article on malapropisms.⁹⁵ Davidson is only claiming that T-sentences are laws local to any specific speaker. They are observations about what a particular speaker means by some word. When Slip Mahoney says to the rest of the Bowery Boys, “Let’s *sympathize* our watches” we know, given sufficient further knowledge of his environment and other utterances, that he means let’s *synchronize* our watches. The T-sentences are law-like in that they are counterfactual supporting generalizations about what some speaker means by his words. While the connection between a “morpho-syntactic” unit and what it designates may be arbitrary, it cannot be subject to much variation. If it varied in a way we could not keep track of, then we could probably no longer recognize the utterances in which it occurred as language.

How, then, does this fit together with metaphor? We have already seen how the formal constraints of Davidson’s theory, as it stands, must exclude metaphorical meaning, and I think the empirical constraints must exclude it as well. As we have seen, the T-sentences must be thought of as law-like and testable, and as such they must support

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁹² *Inquiries*, p. xiv.

⁹³ Fodor and Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper’s Guide*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1992), p. 84-85

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 229

⁹⁵ “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”, from *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Ernest Lepore, ed., Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1986), pp. 433-446.

counterfactuals and must be confirmed by their instances. But how could this work if metaphorical meaning was allowed to ride up in the front seat along with literal meaning? Many utterances would not, once a meaning has been assigned to them, stand up to counterfactuals; and almost any (perhaps just *any*) expression is a candidate to be a metaphor. And once the meaning of a sentence has been established a metaphorical use of that sentence would not be a confirming instance of the established (or what was thought to be established) meaning. The point is that under this theory of meaning we could not establish the meanings of sentences, and after that, of words. The speaker could assent to a sentence under conditions *x* on several occasions, and we may think we have found the meaning of that sentence. Then if the speaker used the same sentence metaphorically she could assent to it under conditions *y*, and perhaps later under conditions *z*, etc. The simplest maneuver to avoid such results, of course, is to exclude metaphorical meaning from the domain under study. This is not an argument Davidson makes against metaphorical meaning, but I think it is implicit in his theory of meaning, and I think it is what motivates him to deny metaphorical meaning.

Now we can return to the question posed earlier about whether Davidson's theory of meaning fulfills the requirements of a truly empirical theory. And we can also ask whether his theory, by excluding metaphorical meaning, lives up to another constraint posed upon it: the principle of charity. My claim is that in rejecting metaphorical meaning Davidson has violated both of these principles. His theory of meaning can and should be adjusted to take metaphor as a semantic concern.

Both the principle of charity and empirical spirit of Davidson's theory demand that we make the most sense out of speakers; that we use the evidence available-- the speaker, her utterances, and her environment. But these principles are moved into the background in Davidson's positive theory of metaphor. According to his positive theory metaphorical utterances would be understood only by their literal meanings and would of course be false. We could not, according to this theory, take the speaker to be saying or meaning anything that is not contained in the literal meanings of these utterances. *At best* we could recognize these sentences as metaphorical and then only understand the speaker to be pointing out similarities between things, but we could not take her to be saying or meaning anything (beyond the literal) by pointing these similarities out. Moreover, we could not, with any kind of assurance, identify the similar features the metaphor user had in mind. These similarities, under Davidson's view of metaphor, could not be made specific or relevant - Davidson does not give us the tools to get at the relevant similarities because those, essentially, would be the *meanings* of the metaphors. But the principle of charity demands that we attribute as much rationality to a speaker's verbal behavior as possible; it demands that we make as much sense of this behavior as possible. We can do this best in the case of metaphor if we can isolate what seem to be the most *rational and relevant similarities* between the things being compared. Furthermore, the empirical constraint holds that we must use all the recourses available, including context.

Imagine, for example, that our speaker utters, "Man is a wolf." In hearing this there may be many similarities brought to mind, possibly including the following: humans

and wolves both have hair; both have four limbs; they are both predatory; and they are both fierce. If the speaker's utterance of this sentence occurs in the context of other, perhaps literal, misanthropic remarks about humanity we would be urged by the principle of charity to consider the last pair of similarities to be relevant. This is how we would go about making the most sense of the speaker's utterances and attributing beliefs to her. And this is essentially what is involved in interpreting low-level metaphors.

So we have identified a way of understanding the contents of beliefs which are expressed and understood through metaphor. In some sense this is similar to what Davidson calls the "effects" of a metaphor. However, within Davidson's theory there is no way to isolate which effects the metaphor user intended. He says that "understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavor as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules."⁹⁶ But as we have seen this kind of creative license would be incompatible with the principle of charity and the empirical constraint. Our argument at this point can be advanced another step by considering the notion of metaphorical truth.

4.4 Metaphorical Truth

Earlier in this chapter I listed some fairly simple metaphors that, I hope, most people could interpret without difficulty. And while literature is always a sure bet for finding metaphors, they saturate the other corners of our linguistic lives, as Davidson and many others have observed.⁹⁷ Several of the examples I gave were from the *New York Times*, but examples could just as easily be found in any newspaper, magazine, academic journal, television sitcom, and so forth. And surely one of the reasons we use them so often is that we think we express something by using them, and that we can say something with them beyond what is contained in their literal content. Moreover, I believe we find them to be meaningful because we also believe that, in some sense, we can say something *true* using them. Is there such a thing as "metaphorical truth?" Nelson Goodman, touching briefly on the subject, says that " 'Metaphorical truth' does not mean that the truth of the sentence is metaphorical but that the sentence taken metaphorically is true."⁹⁸ I think this is just the response most people would give. That is, presented with some sentence they may say that taken metaphorically they believe it is true.

Taking a closer look at metaphorical truth we can return to some things Black says about metaphor in his reply to Davidson.⁹⁹ Black makes the following points about the metaphor with which Davidson opens 'WMM': "Metaphor is the dreamwork of language." Says Black,

- 1) The *thought* that metaphor is the dreamwork of language (that *R*, for short) might have occurred to Davidson, and probably did, before he committed it to paper,

⁹⁶'WMM', p. 245.

⁹⁷See especially George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1980).

⁹⁸From *Of Mind and Other Matters*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (1984), p. 71.

⁹⁹"How Metaphors Work: A Reply to Donald Davidson", *On Metaphor*, Sheldon Sacks, ed.

- 2) A reader could disagree with Davidson's remark (e.g., by objecting that the underlying analogy was "too thin" - or by saying "Metaphor is sometimes waking work"), and
- 3) Reasons could be offered for and against *R*.¹⁰⁰

All three of these assertions seem perfectly sound to me. But I think the first can be more challenging to Davidson if we alter or expand upon it slightly. We can say that Davidson may have had some beliefs about metaphor which he felt could be described by *R*, and these were beliefs he held before *R* occurred to him. This expanded version of (1) captures something which Davidson's positive theory of metaphor cannot handle. Davidson claims that what most other theories of metaphor call the meaning of a metaphor are actually the *effects* metaphors have on us. This idea would make more sense if no one actually created metaphors, that is, if we just found them ready-made and growing on trees. Davidson's positive theory of metaphor is all from the interpreter's point of view, but metaphor makers sometimes have some idea, some content in mind, that they wish to express *before* they decided exactly how to express it.

Black's second two assertions are clearly related, the third really following up on the second. I think it is quite right to say that one could disagree with a metaphor and offer reasons for it, or against. This is done all the time. It may be true that people argue about the truth of a metaphor without even realizing that it is a metaphor, simply taking it as an assertion and then defending or attacking it as such. For example, it is not difficult to imagine a debate about Bill Clinton's integrity in which one interlocutor proclaims, "Clinton is a pinball," and the other quickly retorts, "Not at all; he's a man of steadfast convictions." Both could go on to give reasons for and against their claims.

Whatever the actual status of metaphoric truth is, it must be the case that in using metaphors, speakers believe there to be such a thing as metaphoric truth. Concerning this Davidson undersells what is necessary to make or use a metaphor. He rightly points out that most metaphors are patent falsehoods (although a few are trivial truisms, e.g., "No man is an island"). He is also right in saying that "what matters is not actual falsehood but that the sentence be taken to be false."¹⁰¹ But this only gets us halfway there. It is also necessary that someone using a metaphor *take it to be true*, or *believe* in its metaphoric truth. And taking an utterance to be metaphorically true involves more than just nodding in agreement at the "effects" of seeing one thing as another. There must be some more content than just these effects or speakers would not give reasons for accepting the metaphorical truth of what they say when making a metaphor. The content is just the *relevant* similarities (given the context of the utterance) between the objects brought to comparison by the metaphor. Metaphorical truth could be described as those similarities the relevance of which a speaker would assent to. And metaphorical truth is as necessary to making and interpreting metaphorical utterances as literal truth is to making and interpreting literal utterances.

With the idea of metaphorical truth, let's look again at the mechanics of Davidson's theory of meaning, especially the holism of truth, meaning, and belief.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 182-184.

¹⁰¹ 'WMM', p. 257.

Davidson says that we understand the utterances of a speaker by taking as much as we can of what she says to be true. Moreover, we must assume that the speaker believes in the truth of what she says; this is the connection between belief and meaning. As Davidson says, “there is no completely disentangling questions of what the [speaker] means from questions of what he believes.”¹⁰² If a speaker uses a lot of metaphors in her speech, then on the face of it that person simply says a lot of false things. But the principle of charity urges us to make as much sense of this speaker as we can, and this is just what the notions of metaphorical meaning and metaphorical *truth* allow us to do.

As I have argued it is not merely necessary to the act of using a metaphor that the speaker believe that the sentence is literally false; it is also necessary that she believe it is metaphorically true.¹⁰³ As interpreters we know this and use this information in trying to sort out the true from the false things people say, and these from the metaphors they use. If there were nothing we could call metaphorical truth, then we could not distinguish the false things a speaker says from the metaphorical things she says. Understanding metaphor is just a matter of applying the Davidsonian holism of meaning, truth (in this case, metaphorical truth), and belief in conjunction with the principle of charity.

4.5 Adjusting Davidson’s Theory of Meaning: Making Space For Metaphor

Actually, Davidson has given us a start in this direction, for in a paper on malapropisms he has shown how his theory would handle one class of deviant uses of language.¹⁰⁴ The paper is in some ways an elaboration of the earlier “Convention and Communication,”¹⁰⁵ developing the thesis that convention is not necessary to, and plays no explanatory role in, linguistic communication. In ‘NDE’ Davidson focuses on malapropisms and idiosyncratic language use to show that it is not by knowing a broadly shared, regularly used body of linguistic rules and word meanings that we are able to communicate with one another. Convention facilitates communication but is not essential to it. Davidson even claims that we could understand someone who spoke in nothing but malapropism.¹⁰⁶ Understanding a language is more of a skill than mastery of a set of conventions, and this linguistic competence is manifested in the abilities of interlocutors to converge on “passing theories” of interpretation. But this has nothing to do with their “knowing the same language.” He concludes, then, that “there is no such thing as a language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed,” for there is no “learnable common core of consistent behavior, no shared grammar or rules.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰²“Truth and Meaning”, *Inquiries*, p. 27.

¹⁰³That is, when the speaker utters the sentence as a metaphor, she believes it to express something true.

¹⁰⁴“A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs”, from *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Ernest LePore, ed., Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1986), pp. 433-446.

¹⁰⁵*Inquiries*, pp. 265-280.

¹⁰⁶‘NDE’, pp. 433-434.

¹⁰⁷‘NDE’, pp. 445-446.

The only thing that is necessarily shared and necessary to communication, then, is a passing theory. A passing theory is just a theory geared to the occasion of dealing with a speaker whose speech patterns and idioms we may not be familiar with. Passing theories are elaborations or variations on “prior theories,” which are theories about how, in general, to understand a speaker when she addresses you.¹⁰⁸ Passing theories will be constructed out of the knowledge we gain about the speaker as we go along, and out of the context of the environment of the conversation and the accumulation of shared linguistic understanding.

What makes this especially relevant to metaphor is that Davidson also claims that we can speak meaningfully even by *intentional* misuses of language. Davidson tells the story of Alfred MacKay’s criticism of Keith Donnellan’s famous distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. In this debate MacKay accuses Donnellan of sharing Humpty Dumpty’s theory of meaning (“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, “it means just what I chose it to mean.” This follows a conversation in which Humpty used “glory” to mean “a nice knock-down argument.”).¹⁰⁹ Donnellan, in his reply to MacKay, says that given the proper shared background between interlocutors, words can mean just what a speaker intends regardless of conventional meaning. Donnellan further says that he could, perhaps arrogantly, end his reply with “There’s glory for you” and, given the context of the debate, he would be understood as having said “There’s a nice knock-down argument.” Davidson, agreeing with Donnellan, adds:

MacKay says you cannot change what words mean (and so their reference if that is relevant) merely by intending to; the answer is that this is true, but you can change the meaning provided you believe (and perhaps are justified in believing) that the interpreter has adequate clues for the new interpretation. You may deliberately provide those clues, as Donnellan did for his final ‘There’s glory for you.’¹¹⁰

This is not quite what happens in a metaphor, though. When Davidson says that we can, under propitious circumstances, change the meanings of words, he is talking about the literal meanings. If Donnellan had ended the arguments in his reply to MacKay with “There’s glory for you,” he would have *literally meant* “There’s a knock-down argument.”¹¹¹ And it is the context of his argument with MacKay which would make this

¹⁰⁸‘NDE’, p. 442.

¹⁰⁹To remind the reader of Donnellan’s example supporting his distinction I quote Davidson’s summary: “The referential use is illustrated as follows: Jones says ‘Smith’s murderer is insane’, meaning that a certain man, whom he (Jones) takes to have murdered Smith, is insane. Donnellan says that even if the man that Jones believes to have murdered Smith did not murder Smith, Jones has referred to the man he had in mind; and if that man is insane, Jones has said something true. The same sentence may be used attributively by someone who wants to assert that the murderer of Smith, whoever he may be, is insane” (p. 439).

¹¹⁰‘NDE’, p. 439.

¹¹¹Davidson prefers the term *first* meaning to literal meaning because the later is “too encrusted with philosophical and other extras to do much work” (p. 434). The particular bit of crust Davidson is most likely bothered by is the association “literal” has with “conventional.”

possible. But Davidson argues that Donnellan's original distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions has nothing to do with words changing their meaning or reference. That is, when Jones refers to the person he intended to refer to by using the description "Smith's murderer" the reference is achieved through the normal meanings of the words. Davidson says "all that is needed, if we are to accept this way of describing the situation, is a firm sense of the difference between what *words* mean or refer to and what *speakers* mean or refer to."¹¹²

Interestingly, this is just what Black says is the case with metaphor, as we saw in 2.1. In the slightly revised account of metaphor he gave in his reply to Davidson, Black held essentially that metaphorical meaning is speaker meaning.¹¹³ Davidson seems to concede even more when he says, in the same paragraph, that we can *say* something true by using a false sentence:

Similarly for Donnellan's claim that Jones has said something true when he says 'Smith's murderer is insane', provided the man he believes (erroneously) to have murdered Smith is insane. Jones has *said something true* by using a sentence that is false. This is done intentionally all the time, for example in irony or metaphor.¹¹⁴

Obviously the most fascinating sentences here from our point of view are the last two. Has Davidson changed his mind about metaphorical meaning? Possibly; but there is not quite enough here to make that claim confidently. A more sound move would be to use the totality of ideas in "A Nice Derangement" to highlight the space Davidson has created in his semantic program for the interpretation of deviant linguistic use. Of course, the parallel with metaphor is most striking when the deviance is intentional, as in Donnellan's use of "glory." Here, as in metaphor, deviation from the norm is successfully carried off when interlocutors have established enough background and context that the speaker can confidently expect that her abnormal use of a word will be understood by her hearer, and the hearer does understand.

Now to the mechanics of fitting metaphor into Davidson's overall theory of meaning in light of the difficulties pointed out above: the formal and empirical constraints of the theory. Of course, what we say here can only be a very light sketch of how such a fit might be carried off. The actual development of the theory would no doubt be complicated. Concerning the formal constraint, the idea is that the theory would have to adjust for metaphorical context. The theory would first have to work out a schema for a certain totality of literal utterances and then abstract out the meanings of the individual words, just as in Davidson's normal procedure. This would provide the semantic base for interpreting metaphorical sentences, which are deviant uses of this base. And their location in the totality of finished T-sentences would have to be marked as distinct in kind from T-sentences which give the literal meanings of utterances.

¹¹²'NDE', p. 439 (original emphasis).

¹¹³'How Metaphors Work', p. 443.

¹¹⁴'NDE', p. 440 (emphasis added).

In fact, Davidson has given us some precedence for such a move in the way he handles indexicals. The scheme for giving the meaning of sentences containing such indexical words as “I”, “here”, and “now” involves, as with metaphor, separate and special treatment. As we have seen Davidson holds that sentences containing indexicals must be relativized to time, place, and speaker. So the semantic content of these words will in part be determined by features of the context of utterance. And we can simply extend this idea to cover metaphorical utterances. So just as the single sentence “I am hungry” has different truth-conditions depending on who is uttering it, so will the sentence “Man is a wolf” have different truth-conditions depending upon whether it is taken to be metaphorical or not. One could object that the difference between indexicals and metaphor, though, is that the former are embedded within a context whose features are salient and regular. They are regular, that is, in the sense that the word “I” applies to the same type of thing in every instance. But in the case of low-level metaphors the features of the context are at least very salient, and in some cases regular. This is especially so with utterances of scientific theory (if we take them, as Rorty does, to be metaphorical).

The empirical constraint on T-sentences would similarly have to account for context. As I pointed out the T-sentences in Davidson’s theory have to be law-like and therefore testable, and this seemed to prevent constructing and testing such sentences for metaphorical utterances since they seem to have to definite, stable meaning. While this may be true for complex metaphors, I believe that such sentences could be constructed for low-level metaphors which have significant contextual clues. For example it is not hard to imagine that the T-sentence “ ‘The chairman plowed through the meeting’ is (metaphorically) true if and only if the chairman ruthlessly suppressed irrelevancies” would be testable and support counterfactuals if there was sufficient context and we knew the original utterance was used metaphorically. For instance, the sentence would not be uttered, or its speaker would not assent to its metaphorical truth, if the chairman had gently taken in any and all unrelated matters.

Armed with this scheme we can more confidently attend to Davidson’s major argument in ‘WMM.’ The argument is that if metaphors had meaning beyond the literal, then we could not distinguish the metaphorical use of a word and giving a word a new literal meaning.¹¹⁵ Davidson’s point is that meaning is a relation between a word and its extension, the thing or things it refers to. If in a metaphorical context a word has a new meaning, an addition to its field of reference, then metaphor would not be the unique linguistic phenomena that it is. Giving a new literal meaning to a word is a very prosaic affair, one which does not, necessarily, bring to our attention some similarity between the things named. Davidson concludes that additional meaning cannot be the explanation of how metaphor works, or all sense of metaphor would be lost.

But notice that Davidson’s argument seems to assume that there is only one kind of meaning, one kind of relation between words and things. Moreover, his argument seems to imply that any view which posits metaphorical meaning is committed to the idea

¹¹⁵The argument occurs on pp. 251-252.

that words in a metaphor take on a permanent additional meaning. This, of course, is not necessarily the case, and any adequate theory of metaphorical meaning would have to account for the transient nature of figurative meaning. Unfortunately, I have no satisfactory explanation of what metaphorical meaning is, or exactly how it works. It is not the aim of this work to provide such an explanation. My position is that the absence of such explanation is insufficient reason for dismissing metaphorical meaning altogether. And as I have claimed this is especially so in Davidson's case. The principles involved in his general strategy for constructing a theory of meaning preclude our rejecting the idea that metaphors have no meaning beyond the literal and the companion notion that speakers mean and say something beyond the literal in using them. And we have seen that Davidson's theory can be adjusted to account for the successful communication through metaphorical language.

CHAPTER FIVE: RORTY REVISITED

Now that we have established reasons why Davidson's theory of meaning should adjust for metaphorical meaning, and that his theory can successfully be so adjusted, it remains for me in this chapter to evaluate the consequences of this adjustment for Rorty's account of the contingency of intellectual progress. Also in this chapter I will introduce a second argument against Rorty's account, one which focuses on Rorty's interpretation of Davidson's view of metaphor. The basic idea behind this argument is that by claiming novel scientific and philosophical ideas are really metaphors, Rorty ignores a vital element in Davidson's view: that metaphor is to a large degree a matter of speaker's intentions and the hearer understanding these intentions. That novel theories are metaphors is an essential premise of Rorty's argument for the contingency of intellectual history. But I shall argue that because Rorty inflates the field of utterances which are counted as metaphorical, he undermines the process of radical interpretation by pushing aside the important Davidsonian concept of the inseparability of meaning and belief. However, for my first line of criticism I shall ignore these consequences and grant Rorty his premise that novel theories are metaphors.

5.1 Implications for Rorty of a Revised Davidsonian Account of Metaphor

Recall that Rorty is pursuing a nonteleological account of intellectual history which relies on Davidson's claim that metaphors have no meaning beyond the literal. Rorty thinks such a view of metaphor will let us see intellectual change as contingent and nonteleological. He says that metaphors stand outside the limits of "regular, predictable linguistic behavior."¹¹⁶ As such they have no place in any current "language game," because "to have a meaning is to have a place in a language game. Metaphors, by definition, do not."¹¹⁷ Since they have no place in a language game, metaphors fit with no established pattern of justification; they stand outside these patterns and cause us to create new patterns of justification. This results from the fact that though, as Davidson says, they cause lots of effects in the reader or listener, they do not *represent* anything. They stand for no facts or ideas. If unfamiliar utterances, including novel scientific and moral theories, are metaphorical then they do not represent anything in the world. Only those unfamiliar utterances which prove to be somehow useful become established in a pattern of justification. This process occurs because of the usefulness of the utterances, not because they latch onto the world or give insight into the nature of reality.

Thus with one radical theory of metaphor, Rorty is able to attempt a coup against a collection of long-treasured and tightly connected ideas: that language is a medium between self and world which, with degrees of adequacy, represents objects and phenomena in the world; that our scientific and moral understanding as expressed in language finds its connection to the world through language; and that the development and *progress* of this understanding proceeds through the rational accumulation of knowledge of the world stored and organized by our representational language.

¹¹⁶"Unfamiliar Noises", p. 164.

¹¹⁷*CI&S*, p. 18.

There may be mild exaggeration in this because throughout his writings Rorty makes much use of other anti-essentialist and anti-foundational arguments borrowed from Nietzsche, Quine, Derrida, Wittgenstein, and many others. Further, Rorty claims that Davidson's philosophy as a whole is an account of language which breaks with the idea of representation.¹¹⁸ However, as I pointed out in Chapter One, in *CI&S* Rorty does make what may be described as systematic use of Davidson's view of metaphor. It is systematic in that the first chapter of *CI&S* articulates the contingent nature of language and hence science, art, and moral theory. The following chapters then develop and explore the consequent possibilities and limitations such an account of language presents to the tasks of constructing a public and private morality, a philosophy of the self, and maintaining a healthy democracy.

In Chapter Three I provided arguments claiming that Davidson's theory of metaphor is incongruous with the guiding principles of his theory of linguistic meaning. To be consistent as an account of linguistic meaning, Davidson's theory of metaphor must adjust to the idea of metaphorical meaning and to the idea that speakers express ideas with metaphor. This has given us a way to preserve our intuitions about metaphor as well as a way to make better sense of speakers than possible through Davidson's own positive view of metaphor. We also have a way to make sense of any "unfamiliar" utterances from speakers whom we can hold to be rational. This would include novel scientific and philosophical remarks which Rorty calls metaphorical.

Rorty briefly mentions that he follows Mary Hesse in thinking of novel scientific theories as metaphors.¹¹⁹ Hesse's argument for such a view is that it avoids certain problems associated with theoretical terms, viz., their meaning and connection with empirical data by means of correspondence rules. If theoretical explanation is seen as metaphoric redescription, then the above problems with theoretical terms are reinterpreted as "a problem of metaphoric meaning: how are theoretical terms meaningfully developed by metaphor...drawn from natural descriptive language?"¹²⁰ Of course, the hazards of theoretical terms in science is not an issue in which Rorty is interested; he is simply borrowing the idea of scientific theories as metaphor. I suppose what justifies such a move for Rorty is that new theoretical utterances are unfamiliar uses of language, as ordinary metaphors are in Davidson's view. For example, the first utterances of "Gravity causes mutual attraction between bodies" and "Gases are collections of randomly moving

¹¹⁸ *CI&S*, p. 10.

¹¹⁹ *CI&S*, p. 16. Rorty cites Hesse's "The Explanatory Function of Metaphor", in *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1980), pp. 111-125. Interestingly, though Hesse does indeed claim that we should see "theoretical explanation as metaphoric redescription of the domain of the explanandum" (p. 111), she advocates the interaction theory of metaphor as developed by Max Black. She holds that metaphors are indeed meaningful and have "cognitive implications whose nature is a proper subject of philosophic discussion" (p.111). In fact their meaning, in her view, is as determinate as ordinary propositions: "Theory as metaphor is understood in this view to have reference and truth value in the domain of the explanandum, and hence to be falsifiable" (p. xvii).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

particles” were unfamiliar sounds and were false, considered against the scientific background of their debuts.

Since these sentences were at one time unfamiliar and false, they had no place in the language games of the era in which they were first uttered. And as metaphors they had no specific cognitive content. For Rorty these sentences, when they first appeared, could be used as a way of “producing effects on your interlocutor or your reader, but not as [a way of] conveying a message.”¹²¹ Now some metaphors will produce useful effects and others will not. This is the source of the contingency that Rorty claims permeates our language, because there is nothing *in* or *about* the metaphor (because it is mere noise) such that its effects will be useful and it will be “picked up.” Nor is there a way to determine of those metaphors which proved useful which of its effects did the trick.¹²²

But, if the arguments in Chapter Three are right, this is based on an inaccurate account of metaphor, one which is incompatible with a Davidsonian semantics. In fact we can make very good sense out of new scientific utterances, understand their cognitive content, and understand the speaker as saying and meaning something by them. As with ordinary low-level metaphors, the kind of metaphors under consideration here were motivated by and meant to express an idea their creators had in mind before saying them. They were surrounded by much context, which included auxiliary explanation and other established technical terms. For example, even a theory as original as Darwin’s theory of evolutionary change of species was set in the context of Lamarck’s ideas about the gradual, slow growth in complexity of individual kinds of life form.¹²³

Interpreting new scientific theories in Davidsonian semantics would of course proceed by the same principles for interpreting any other remarks: that we assign as much rationality to the speakers and their utterances as possible; that we interpret utterances as expressions of beliefs the speaker holds true; and that our results are testable. Such a procedure applied to novel theories will yield truth conditions as determinately related to the sentences of the theories as ordinary sentences. This is the case because of the careful, methodical nature of scientific practice and discourse.

Let’s take a closer look at the example of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Darwin sought to explain evolutionary change through the process of what he termed natural selection. His idea could be summed up by the sentence “Evolution occurs through the process of natural selection,” or *S*. I take it that for Rorty this would be a clear case of a metaphorical utterance, for the sentence has no “fixed place in a language game.” Darwin tells us that the idea of natural selection was developed out of observations about the

¹²¹ *CI&S*, p. 18

¹²² *UN*, p. 171.

¹²³ I want to remind the reader of an important disclaimer I made in Chapter One. I am not defending the idea of rational, non-contingent intellectual and moral progress. I am only defending it against a particular kind of criticism; one based on Rorty’s use of Davidson’s theory of metaphor. So while Rorty’s criticism is related to, for example, Kuhnian claims about theory incommensurability, they are two separate arguments.

processes surrounding artificial selection in domestic animal breeding. This he coupled with Malthus' doctrine of the "Struggle for Existence," or the idea that individual members of a population outnumber the resources necessary to sustain their existence.¹²⁴

Now, according to Rorty, since *S* had no place in the language games of its initial utterance, *S* comes to us as "unfamiliar noise." Moreover, *S* expresses no definite proposition. It expresses no beliefs, it has no definite cognitive content, and nothing essential about *S* ensures how it will be understood or that it will come to express a belief.¹²⁵ But this is an unacceptable explanation of Darwin's utterance in light of our revised account of metaphor. We must, and we can, make more sense of Darwin's remark than this from a Davidsonian perspective.

The clearest way to think of Darwin's utterance as metaphorical is to say that he is, in some sense comparing evolution to artificial selection. To properly interpret Darwin's remark along Davidsonian lines we assume that Darwin wishes to express something true (even if we must adhere to Rorty's scheme and say that Darwin wished to express some "metaphorical" truth). We may say, following Davidson, that the belief was that these two things were similar in some previously unnoticed way. However, as stressed in the arguments of Chapter Three we must say that Darwin believed them to be similar in some significant and relevant way; to say otherwise would be to neglect the principle of charity.¹²⁶ We may also hold, per Davidson, that when *S* was first heard it produced different "effects" upon the audience.

But following the principle of charity, to properly interpret Darwin the best possible sense must be made of his remark. This means that, as interpreters, we must narrow the range of "effects" and endeavor to understand the content of Darwin's belief. This process is aided by the rich context of the utterance. There was at the time much background knowledge available on the idea of evolution (in Lamarck's work and elsewhere) and also for the domestic breeding of animals. Darwin provided further context with his empirical findings during his journey on the *Beagle*. This empirical evidence is presented as observations throughout *The Origin of Species*, as context for Darwin's theory of evolution. Such context places limits on what Darwin could

¹²⁴"As many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive; and as, consequently, there is a frequently recurring struggle for existence, it follows that any being, if it vary however slightly in any manner profitable to itself, under the complex and sometimes varying conditions of life, will have a better chance of surviving, and thus be *naturally selected*. From the strong principle of inheritance, any selected variety will tend to propagate its new and modified form." Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, New York: Penguin (1958), [originally, 1872, 6th ed.], pp. 28-29.

¹²⁵"For a noise to become so describable [as 'an expression of belief'] is for it to assume a place in a pattern of justification of belief. This can, under propitious circumstances, happen to any noise... 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." ('UN') p. 171.

¹²⁶That is, as interpreters we must take Darwin to be motivated by specific beliefs he has about similarities between natural and artificial selection. An interpretation without this assumption would not be making the best possible sense of his remarks and would result in a mistaken interpretation.

reasonably be expected to believe the relevant and significant similarities were. And understanding all of this context is just understanding the *truth-conditions* of *S*. That is, if one understood the previous theories of evolution (Lamarck's and others'), understood the nature of domestic animal breeding, understood Malthus' doctrine of Struggle for Existence, and understood Darwin's empirical observations, then one would have knowledge of what would make *S* true. These are the conditions under a speaker of *S* would assent to *S*'s truth. A T-sentence (no doubt a very complex one) could be created for *S*, and it could be empirically tested. This, of course, is just what it is to give the meaning of a sentence in Davidsonian semantics.

I conclude that, if our arguments from Chapter Three are correct, Rorty's attempt to use Davidson's view of metaphor to argue for the contingent nature of scientific and cultural change fails because we can give a stable and shared meaning for novel scientific utterances, even if those utterances are understood as metaphors. We saw in Chapter Three that it is likely that Davidson rejected metaphorical meaning because it was incompatible with parts of his theory of meaning as it stood. But the rejection of metaphorical meaning was an even stronger violation of his guiding principles of *theory construction*. Because of this, Davidson's overall theory must be adjusted to account for metaphorical meaning. We have seen that low-level metaphors, including novel theories, are vehicles for expressing beliefs, conveying a message, and bearing a meaning. In light of this Rorty's claim that novel theories are "unfamiliar noises" does not make sense. Metaphors, including new theories, are simply more familiar than Rorty thinks.

5.2 Has Rorty Missed the Point?

My second line of criticism against Rorty focuses on the way he interprets Davidson's ideas concerning metaphor. So, if my arguments in Chapter Three fail, I maintain that Rorty's argument for contingency using Davidson's unrevised view of metaphor will nevertheless not go through because he misunderstands a central distinction Davidson makes.

Rorty claims to be using Davidson's view of metaphor to point out the contingency of intellectual history. However, inspection of Davidson's view reveals that Rorty is either an admiring yet clumsy reader of Davidson or that he willfully overlooks crucial components that lie in the heart of Davidson's theory. The central offense of Rorty's interpretation of Davidson's theory is that it does not preserve the important distinction between using words metaphorically and giving old words a *new literal* use. In Rorty's hands every new use of words is considered a metaphorical use. As we have seen, this includes all new scientific and philosophical theories. Moreover, he seems to be claiming that this conception of novel discourse is easily derived from Davidson's view of metaphor. For he says that if we "see the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical in the way Davidson sees it," we will understand it as merely the "distinction between familiar and unfamiliar uses of noises and marks."¹²⁷ For Rorty it seems that all

¹²⁷ *CI&S*, p. 17.

language is a product of metaphor. Once a metaphor “dies,” or becomes literalized, it becomes embedded in the culture and takes its place among other dead metaphors. This embedded area is the realm of current literal meaning: “Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as a platform and foil for new metaphors.”¹²⁸

As we have seen, for Rorty the initial utterance (however that may be defined) of “Evolution occurs through the mechanism of natural selection,” was metaphorical in that it was an unfamiliar use of familiar words.¹²⁹ They eventually became literalized and found a place in the realm of meaningful utterances. According to Rorty’s interpretation of Davidson, novel scientific theories (along with novel philosophical theories) are meaningless, since they, as metaphors, fall outside the area of semantics: “To have a meaning is to have a place in a language game. Metaphors, by definition, do not.”¹³⁰

Returning to ‘WMM’, it is clear that Rorty’s interpretation far exceeds the bounds of Davidson’s claims about metaphor. On Rorty’s interpretation the domain of metaphor is startlingly vast. Consequently, what is special about metaphor is lost. But Davidson is specific about the necessity of the distinction between using words metaphorically and giving a new meaning to an existing term. For him these are two entirely different linguistic concerns: “In one case...our attention is directed to language, in the other, to what language is about. Metaphor...belongs in the second category.”¹³¹ That is, when learning a new literal meaning for a word we are focusing primarily on the word itself, on its capacities and reference. In metaphor the focus is certain relevant and significant similarities between things (context determines what is relevant and significant, as I argued in Chapter Three).

Davidson stresses that if we fail to maintain the distinction we lose both what is interesting about metaphor and what makes metaphor special. This significance usually involves the unique way that a fresh metaphor causes us to notice a similarity between things we had not noticed previously. Davidson brings out the distinction in discussing the transition a metaphorical utterance can make into literalness. This discussion closes an argument Davidson gives against a theory of metaphor which, like most of the theories Davidson rails against, explains it as a semantic device. Part of his criticism is that it does

¹²⁸ *CI&S*, p. 16.

¹²⁹ Rorty is, however, slightly more circumspect about leveling the distinction between the metaphorical use of words and giving an existing word a new literal meaning in the earlier essay, “Unfamiliar Noises.” He describes this as a distinction between metaphors and paradoxes. However, he goes on to claim that the “two blend into one another.” He says that the two can be distinguished 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.” (‘UN’, p. 169). But in *CI&S* in his discussion of metaphor and Davidson’s theory, Rorty makes no such distinction. There we get assertions about “Newton’s metaphorical use of *gravitas*,” and scientific revolutions as “metaphoric redescriptions” of nature (*CI&S*, p. 17). We must conclude that for the purposes of his later arguments in *CI&S* (arguments which build upon his interpretation of Davidson’s theory of metaphor) he decided to drop this distinction.

¹³⁰ *CI&S*, p. 18.

¹³¹ ‘WMM’, p. 252.

not preserve the difference between making a metaphor and giving an old word a new literal use.

Once upon a time, I suppose, rivers and bottles did not, as they do now, literally have mouths. Thinking of present usage, it doesn't matter whether we take the word 'mouth' to be ambiguous because it applies to entrances to rivers and openings of bottles as well as to animal apertures...What does matter is that when 'mouth' applied only metaphorically to bottles, the application made the hearer *notice* a likeness between animal and bottle openings. (Consider Homer's reference to wounds as mouths). Once one has the present use of the word, with literal application to bottles, there is nothing left to notice. There is no similarity to seek because it consists simply in being referred to by the same word.¹³²

Rorty's interpretation of Davidson's theory dissolves this effect that metaphors have on us. Metaphors can bring into relief some feature of the world that we had not earlier recognized. But what makes metaphor interesting and, often, inspiring is its uncannily indirect manner. To point out directly the similarities that metaphor makes us notice is to use ordinary literal prose. It is, in other words, what happens when metaphors are paraphrased. By simply forcing all novel uses of words under the heading of 'metaphor,' Rorty wipes out one of language's most fascinating features. Under Rorty's interpretation of Davidson all sense of metaphor evaporates because *all* new uses of words are metaphorical.

But there is a larger issue here than just Davidson's view of metaphor. Recall that Davidson claims, correctly, that what makes an utterance metaphorical is not just that it be literally false, but that it is *taken* to be literally false.¹³³ So in order to make or use a metaphor the speaker must believe that the utterance is literally false. Further, for an interpreter to understand it as a metaphor she must take the speaker to believe in the utterance's literal falsity. It is the speaker's attitude toward the utterance that sets it off as a metaphor or a literal statement. As we have seen, this distinction in attitude is one which Rorty obviates in his use of Davidson's view. In so doing Rorty dissolves one of the most central concepts of Davidsonian semantics: the connection between meaning and belief.

As we have seen in Chapter One, Davidson holds that in radical interpretation the interpretation of language must proceed hand in hand with the interpretation of beliefs. We cannot *base* the interpretation of one upon the other. At the outset of interpretation we must hold as many of the speaker's beliefs to be true as we can, within reasonable limits. As we go about the business of interpreting the speaker, assigning truth conditions to her utterances, we refine and adjust our theory along the way. That is, in order to have an accurate theory of meaning we must make adjustments to our theory to account for possible mistakes on our part (erroneous hypotheses - false T-sentences), error on the speaker's part (in the form of false beliefs), mistakes in speech on the speaker's part (in the form of malapropisms, slips of tongue, etc.), and perhaps metaphorical utterances. In order to make these discriminations we must be able to make fine discriminations between

¹³²'WMM', p. 252.

¹³³'WMM', p. 257.

the speaker's beliefs. We must be able to form and test hypotheses about the attitudes the speaker has toward her utterances.

However, in Rorty's version of Davidson's view of metaphor no such distinctions are possible. According to Rorty *all deviant uses of language are metaphors*. But if there is no way for the interpreter to distinguish the metaphorical use of a word from the use of that word in a new literal way, then there is no way to distinguish either of these from an error, in the form of a malapropism or a false belief. If this is the case, then how could we know, for example, what the sentence "All A's are B's" meant if we could not discriminate between literal assertion, metaphor, and error? The problem is that interpretation could never get off the ground. Without the ability to distinguish the different *attitudes* speakers have toward their sentences, we could not establish a systematic pattern of, say, predication for some given word. We could not determine when it applies correctly and when not, and so we could never secure stable truth-conditions for it. We could not determine its meaning.

This is an intolerable result, even for Rorty, especially given his strong advocacy of Davidson's semantic project.¹³⁴ By not recognizing the distinction between using a word metaphorically and giving it a new literal use, Rorty tampers with a core tenet of Davidson's theory of linguistic meaning and leaves behind an unworkable theory. Again, the arguments in this section proceed by suspending the arguments made in Chapter Three for a revision of Davidson's view of metaphor. Even without such revision I maintain that Rorty cannot use Davidson's view to argue for the contingency of intellectual history because Rorty's own revision of Davidson's view is inconsistent with Davidson's theory of linguistic meaning.

5.3 Conclusion

Rorty's proposal to use a theory of metaphor to argue for the contingency of language and hence intellectual and cultural change is an interesting one. However, it ultimately fails, at least as long as this proposal rests on a Davidsonian theory of metaphor and meaning. I have shown that Davidson's view of metaphor, though *prima facie* just the kind of view he needs given his overall theory of meaning, is actually incompatible with his guiding principles of theory construction. To be consistent with the empirical constraint and the principle of charity, Davidson must adjust his semantic theory to account for metaphorical meaning rather than avoiding such adjustment by denying metaphorical meaning. Moreover, I hope that I have successfully described how such an adjustment might look, and that with it we could interpret at least low-level metaphorical utterances as meaningful beyond their literal content. If successful such an adjustment would save our intuitions about metaphorical meaning.

More importantly this adjustment would subvert Rorty's attempt to support his claim that because language is very much alive with metaphor, intellectual history,

¹³⁴See, for example, "Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991).

philosophy, and science are radically contingent and subject to no rational order of progression and change. Furthermore, I have shown that if the arguments presented in Chapter Three concerning metaphorical meaning should be proved wrong, Rorty still cannot base his arguments about contingency on Davidson's theory of metaphor if he wants to be consistent with the broader Davidsonian semantic project. For Rorty's own theory to be at all interesting he must expand the base of what gets called metaphorical, borrowing heavily from what is ordinarily taken to be literal language. But at the same time, such a move, which necessarily washes out the distinction between metaphor and new literal meaning, cannot support the need to make distinctions among the attitudes speakers have toward their sentences. Without the ability to make these distinctions the project of radical interpretation collapses.

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