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Kant, Davidson and the Value of Metaphor

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This essay will offer a reading of Donald Davidson's influential paper 'What Metaphors Mean', situating it alongside a consideration of Kant's theory of the aesthetic idea from the *Critique of Judgement*. Following an exploration of these two thinkers' ideas on the nature of metaphor, I will suggest that Kant's theory might be useful for understanding how metaphor is valued in Davidson's account, in the light of the latter's claim that 'novelty is not the issue' in considering how metaphor works. Both theories, I suggest, ultimately cast metaphor as 'performative' in bringing about a certain mental state through their utterance, as opposed to simply *stating* something.¹

I will first provide an outline of the salient aspects of Kant's theory that will be taken up with reference to Davidson later in the paper. Kant does not discuss metaphor explicitly in the third *Critique*, although the concept of metaphor is central to his notion of the 'aesthetic idea' and is thus given a prime position in his theory of fine art. For Kant, an aesthetic idea is the counterpart of a rational idea: the latter exists as a determinate concept whereas no such concept exists for an aesthetic idea (which is therefore necessarily indeterminate). An aesthetic idea can be exhibited through works of literature and art as these engage the imagination in a particular way that ordinary language and everyday perception of visual images does not. The opposition between rational and aesthetic ideas is demonstrated by Kant's brief reference to the verbal arts, oratory and poetry:

Oratory is the art of engaging in a task of the understanding as [if it were] a free play of the imagination; poetry is the art of conducting a free play of

the imagination as [if it were] a task of the understanding. (§51) (Kant 1987: 321)

Oratory works with rational ideas, with which it attempts to be creative (perhaps by appearing to be spontaneous) whilst nevertheless operating with necessarily determinate concepts so that the audience's *understanding* may be directly appealed to. Poetry, on the other hand, operates with ideas that are not necessarily rational as they are not fully determined conceptually, but nevertheless engages with them *as if* they are so. In this way, poetry attempts to appeal to the understanding but cannot fully succeed in this simply because of the lack of determinate concepts that are needed for true understanding. As an antithesis to oratory, it thus appeals primarily to the audience's *imagination*.

The beauty of fine art (including literature) lies in the manner in which the aesthetic idea is expressed. According to Kant, 'fine art is the art of genius' (§46) as it is the artist-genius who is best able to find a new 'rule', a new way of exhibiting the aesthetic idea. We know from earlier parts of the third *Critique* that the experience of beauty occurs when the perceiving subject's imagination enters into a free play with their understanding, as if formulating a determinate concept for the content of the work. That is, imagination and understanding act as if they are attempting to discover what this content is and so come up with a determinate expression of it as a new rational idea.

It follows that arts such as poetry express something that ordinary language, which directly relies on logical formulation for the adequate expression of determinate concepts, cannot capture. This occurs primarily through the idea of the 'symbol': in the case of poetry, through metaphor. It would seem that attempts to paraphrase the metaphors that constitute the heart of poetry are thus futile:

poetry and oratory...[as well as painting or sculpture] take the spirit that animates [*beleben*] their works solely from the aesthetic attributes of the objects, attributes that accompany the logical ones [i.e. the structures of

language] and that give imagination a momentum which makes it think more in response to these objects [*dabei*], though in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended within one concept and hence in one determinate linguistic expression. (§49) (Kant 1987: 184)

Metaphor, and aesthetic symbols in general, cannot be paraphrased because they contain concepts that are not catered for by existing categories of the understanding. Thus adequate formulation of the ‘content’ of the metaphor in ordinary, non-metaphorical language is impossible. Because there is no empirical concept that can match or explain the metaphor, there is a necessary ‘striving beyond experience’, where organisation of the concept becomes the task of pure reason. Paraphrasing a metaphor would mean expressing its content in metaphor-free propositional language: the feeling of beauty resulting from this task of reason would therefore be lost and there would consequently be no need for the metaphor or aesthetic symbol.

Davidson shares with Kant this view that metaphors are not open to explication in ordinary language. Indeed, his problem with the influential account of metaphor given by Max Black (1955) revolves around the fact that Black, having dismissed some traditional accounts of metaphor (accounts variously claiming that the task of the reader is to uncover a ‘hidden meaning’), claims that the best way to think of metaphor is as having a definite cognitive content that can be retained through paraphrase. According to Black’s own ‘interaction’ view, ‘when we use a metaphor, we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction’ (Black 1955: 285). This requires metaphor to have two subjects: a principal subject and a subsidiary subject. The reader’s task is to reconstitute the meaning of the metaphor by transferring ‘commonplace’ features of the subsidiary subject onto the principal subject. In this way, the meaning of the metaphor will become apparent. ‘Juliet is the sun’ *means* that ‘Juliet’ exhibits some properties we associate with ‘the sun’, such as the provision of light (as a necessary condition

for life), perhaps behaving in a reliable and predictable way (in the way we can rely on the sun to rise and set each day), or being the centre of attention (as the planets revolve around the sun), for example. This theory does not seem to overcome the problem of metaphor being conflated with simile. Earlier in his paper, Black noted that the idea of a ‘comparison view’ of metaphor, wherein metaphor is viewed as operating by a straightforward comparison of features of two objects, resulted in metaphor becoming simply an elliptical simile, ‘[f]or it holds that metaphorical statement might be replaced by an equivalent literal comparison’ (Black 1955: 283). In this respect, the metaphor ‘Juliet is the sun’ would be identical in meaning to ‘Juliet is *like* the sun’; that is, ‘Juliet exhibits properties in common with the sun, in being necessary for life...(etc.)’.

Black discards this as an insufficient understanding of the nature of metaphor, and claims that metaphor appears to operate in a more complex way than simile: literal resemblance might sometimes be hard to find. He suggests that metaphor in fact ‘*creates* the similarity’ (285), rather than expressing a similarity that might be taken as already somehow self-evident. But it seems that, even if this is true, metaphor might still function as an abbreviated simile: claiming that metaphor creates a similarity does not mean we can discard the possibility of its operating like a simile in drawing attention to a straightforward likeness between two objects. The upshot of this is that Black’s ‘interaction’ view does not in fact get past this metaphor-as-elliptical-simile idea. Indeed, the very idea of a transference of properties from a subsidiary to a principal subject strengthens the idea that some shared property is central to metaphorical meaning: declaring that ‘property P of object O (such as the sun) is exhibited, albeit in a different way, by subject S (such as Juliet)’ is, in fact, not structurally different from saying ‘S *is like* O (by virtue of exhibiting a transferred or projected property P)’. Further, contrary to Kant’s view of the aesthetic idea, Black seems to suggest that the reader necessarily comes up with a determinate concept when engaging with a metaphor by attending to discernible likenesses between objects. Whilst Kant viewed the aesthetic symbol as a setting into free play of the mind (imagination

and understanding) as a result of having no adequate extant determinate concept, Black's view suggests that a determinate concept *is* reached, as metaphor is in fact a straightforward projection of properties, the recognition of which functions to determine meaning and so we come up with a definite concept: 'Juliet is like the sun because of particular common properties such as...'

This view retains the notion of 'deciphering' from the other theories that Black dismisses, as a corollary of the idea of meaning being generated through a property-transfer between objects. In this sense, the reader actively uncovers a meaning that exists beyond the grammatical surface and that would appear to be determinable, therefore having a content that can be adequately expressed in an alternative way using ordinary, propositional language. Thus the meaning is not confined to metaphorical language and metaphor does not ultimately communicate meaning in a particularly different way to non-metaphorical language, although of course much of the aesthetic effect of the metaphor will be missed.

This basic account of Black's position is useful in seeing on just what basis Davidson's theory builds. Black wanted to get past the constraint of viewing metaphor as fulfilling the function of simile: his transference idea was an attempt at this. Davidson, however, succeeds where Black failed by showing how the meaning of the metaphor is not confined to its function as an elliptical simile. According to Davidson, 'metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more' (Davidson 1981: 30). Juliet literally is the sun. This, Davidson admits, appears to fly in the face of common sense. How, after all, could Juliet be the sun? It seems that this assertion relies principally on the novelty of such an image but, as I will suggest, what seems to be at work here is slightly more complex than a straightforward 'novelty value'.

Davidson refutes Black's suggestion that metaphor can be explained through paraphrase. The possibility of paraphrase means that some basic cognitive content must exist that can remain constant through the change in words used to

express it: such a meaning would have to be extralinguistic. If this were true, metaphorical language could communicate meaning in the same way as non-metaphorical language: the difference should be merely aesthetic. Davidson, however, claims that metaphorical statements cannot contain such cognitive content, as truth, in his view, does not exist beyond actual sentences and there are of course no sentences 'out there' in the world that exist *apart from* language. So the meaning of a metaphor exists at the level of the sentence and not beyond it: therefore there can be no 're-wording' that will express some underlying, hidden meaning, as no such meaning exists within a metaphor.

How are we to make sense of this? Attempts at paraphrase, whilst always inadequate, also seem inevitable. It seems that something about the nature of paraphrase provides the key to understanding exactly where 'meaning' needs to be separated from attempts at paraphrase or critical exegesis. Davidson says: 'what we attempt in "paraphrasing" a metaphor cannot be to give its meaning, for that lies on the surface; rather we attempt to evoke what the metaphor brings to our attention' (Davidson 1981: 44). When we try to provide a paraphrase for a metaphor we are searching for a description of our imaginative engagement with the metaphor and not a description of some 'meaning' contained *within* the metaphor. In Kant's account, paraphrase appears to be aiming for exactly the same thing: a description of imaginative engagement. Because the understanding cannot settle upon a determinate concept, imaginative engagement cannot be formulated into words as this would require that imaginative experience be put into propositional form: this cannot happen if there is no determinate concept to express. Indeed, for Davidson, the fact that we cannot paraphrase our experience of exactly what is brought to our attention by a metaphor is because 'much of what we are caused to notice is *not propositional* in character' (Davidson 1981: 44; my italics). So whilst metaphor might still (and very obviously *does*) make us imaginatively attend to similarities between different things, we cannot claim that the fact that Juliet might be like the sun in exhibiting certain properties is the *meaning* of the metaphor: what we notice and what the words mean are entirely

different phenomena. The content of imaginative engagement does not constitute meaning.

In this respect, it seems that ‘figurative meaning’ might be a fiction. Literal meanings make us attend to similarities but this does not result in figuratively meaningful sentences since meaning is simply a property of sentences and can therefore be nothing other than literal. This helps us to see the confusion in Black’s characterisation of meaning in his analysis of the ‘comparison’ view of metaphor (the idea that metaphor functions as a virtual simile). Here, ‘[t]he author provides not his [*sic*] intended meaning, m , but some function thereof, $f(m)$; the reader’s task is to apply the inverse function, f^{-1} , and so obtain $f^{-1}(f(m))$, *i.e.*, m , the original meaning’ (Black 1955: 282). Davidson’s separation of meaning from any potential figurative aspects of metaphor suggests that meaning becomes less codified (the reader in Black’s account has to ‘crack the code’ by applying an inverse function of the supposed figurative meaning). In Davidson’s view, a certain meaning (m) that might be intended by the author cannot claim to be somehow ‘truer’ than any other meaning the reader may gain from the experience (what Black calls the ‘function’ of the intended meaning ($f(m)$)). In fact, ‘intention’ seems to become irrelevant as $f(m)$ – what the author presents us with (the sentence, in all its literal significance) – is the actual meaning.² Any ‘intended meaning’ that is not actually given cannot be a meaning as such as it does not exist at the level of the sentence. The reader’s interaction with the metaphor thus means a further ‘function’ is applied as the reader searches for figurative possibility: $f_1(f(m))$. This may coincide with a particular meaning intended by the author, *i.e.* $f^{-1}(f(m))$ (*i.e.* m),³ but this is by no means *necessarily* the case: m (whatever it might be) does not become prioritised as the actual meaning of the metaphor. Instead, meaning resides at the literal level, with what the reader is originally presented with: $f(m)$. We can, following Davidson, thus get rid of the idea of ‘figurative meaning’ and replace it with a ‘perception of resemblances’ that must be explicitly separated from ‘meaning’:

‘The point of the concept of linguistic meaning is to explain what can be done with words. But the supposed figurative meaning of a simile explains nothing; it is not a feature of the word that the word has prior to and independent of the context of use, and it rests upon no linguistic customs except those that govern ordinary meaning. (Davidson 1981: 38)

Whilst it is legitimate to perceive one thing *as* another – in exhibiting a common property, for instance (like Juliet and the sun sharing the property of emanating warmth) – it is not legitimate to assign this observation the status of ‘metaphorical meaning’ (e.g., taking ‘Juliet is the sun’ *as meaning* ‘Juliet, like the sun, emanates warmth...’). Even if we view this as a projection or transference (as Black does) we may *notice* the similarity and the existence of potential principal and subsidiary subjects, but cannot take this comparison as being where meaning lies; instead, ‘[m]etaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight’ (Davidson 1981: 45). So it seems that metaphor is valuable as it helps us to see things differently, through a different ‘lens’ (Davidson is here consistent with Black; cf. Black 1955: 288). Our perception is altered as a result of the metaphor and we are prompted to see not just the poetic capacity of language but of the expressive inadequacy of existing language through this new ‘way of seeing’.

Although Davidson does not dwell on this idea explicitly, I think we can legitimately infer it from his distinction between metaphors as ‘living’ and ‘dead’. One of the most important and interesting aspects of metaphor, it seems, is an ability to draw attention ‘to what language is about’ (Davidson 1981: 35): the way in which language is able to communicate our experiences. A new metaphor, it seems, invites our interest as it expresses something in a different way than existing means of expression can (in this respect, it seems consistent with Black’s characterisation of metaphor as a catachresis) but, with time, its use becomes common and it eventually gets taken literally. ‘Once upon a time,’ Davidson claims,

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, or we think there is a single wide field of application that embraces both. (Davidson 1981: 35)

So, an established metaphor becomes literalised and it appears that metaphor is valuable for its role in keeping language 'alive', continually investing old words with new meanings.

This is consistent with the claim made by Richard Rorty that 'a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change' (Rorty 1999: 7). Progress can occur only with continual 'redescriptions' that linguistic devices such as metaphor offer us: Galileo achieved his success by inventing a (strange) new way of talking that was consequently adopted as more useful than the old way. It seems, in fact, that every major epochal shift can be read as the result of new ways of talking about the world, new sets of redescriptions and consequently the literalisation of the metaphorical mode offered by each redescription. This insight has its parallel in Kant's theory of fine art: the aesthetic symbol is introduced through the work of the genius and becomes part of the established vocabulary of the art form, thereby opening itself up for revision or redescription on the part of future artists or poets:

Accordingly, the product of genius (as regards what is attributable to genius in it rather than to possible learning or academic instruction) is an example that is meant not to be imitated, but to be followed by another genius. (For in mere imitation the element of genius in the work – what constitutes its spirit – would be lost.) The other genius, who follows the example, is aroused by it to a feeling of his own originality, which allows him to exercise in art his freedom from the constraint of rules, and to do so in such a way that art itself acquires a new rule by this, thus showing that the talent is exemplary. (§49) (Kant 1987: 186-187)

Of course, the redescription offered by new aesthetic symbols like metaphor does not happen of its own accord, but only after extensive study of the vocabulary available at the particular point when the new artist is working: only then can novelty of expression be convincingly achieved and consequently assimilated into the language of the medium (be it words or visual images) for the next generation of poets or visual artists. Given Rorty's claim that such poetic reworking represents a somewhat arbitrary yet necessary kind of progress, it is not difficult to see how a metaphor or other aesthetic symbol might 'die' – become literalised – once its novelty has worn off and is then assimilated into the 'rules' of existing non-metaphorical language, along with other dead metaphors or symbols.

This positive valuation of the novelty of metaphorical utterance might of course bear out Davidson's suggestion that it is a mistake to think that metaphor can be 'a form of communication alongside ordinary communication' (Davidson 1981: 30) if by 'communication' we mean an interpersonal transfer of meaning. Ordinary language (containing 'dead' metaphors) is of course apt – indeed, *designed* – for this: meanings are standardised, existing straightforwardly at the level of the sentence. Metaphorical language cannot communicate in this way, as the metaphor has, by definition, not yet died: its meaning is simply the literal meaning which is often going to be propositionally absurd or illogical and so cannot possibly communicate in the same way as ordinary language. So Davidson is right to insist on a distinction between the communicative capacities of metaphorical and non-metaphorical language (a distinction that will be important below, in considering the notion of the performative).

In the light of this view of metaphor as essential for the continuation of language and art (especially in the case of poetry, which is both) it seems that Davidson might prize metaphor most highly for its novelty value. After all, we have seen how metaphor is important for altering our perceptions and ways of seeing as well as for the imaginative exercise that accompanies this alteration. However, he is quite explicit: 'Novelty is not the issue' (Davidson 1981: 36). There is no guarantee that a metaphor will be literalised; particularly true, it would seem, of

poetry, in which a metaphor needs to remain ‘alive’ (that is, it must not become assimilated into ordinary language, as this would result in a more mundane, ‘non-poetic’ significance). It might also be true that a word intended metaphorically might be taken literally from its inception. This seems consistent with Black’s important concession that ‘[t]here is, in general, no simple “ground” for the necessary shifts of meaning – no blanket reason why some metaphors work and others fail’ (Black 1955: 292). We cannot expect all metaphors to follow exactly the same pattern in terms of their co-option by the dominant discursive context. This would seem to represent a problem to Kant, who operates with a more monolithic conception of the aesthetic idea in which the successful symbol will always have the necessary poetic vitality and presence (which he characterises as *Geist*) to be incorporated into future vocabularies. However, an expression in a poem might exhibit aesthetic interest and merit, and yet resist literalisation and remain unknown to ordinary language; or, in the visual arts, a particular image might remain unadopted by future painters or sculptors. If Kant wants to suggest that a symbol that does contain such *Geist* must necessarily be taken up and used by future generations, the historical process would seem much less arbitrary than is suggested by the likes of Davidson and Rorty: adoption and adaptation of symbols is practically prescribed; indeed, the symbol might be considered successful only if such assimilation takes place.

So Davidson insists that novelty is ‘not the point’ of metaphor as there is no guarantee that a metaphor will ‘work’ in any given way in terms of assimilation into non-metaphorical language. Is it, then, right to characterise a metaphor as successful in Davidson’s view only if it ‘dies’ and becomes assimilated into ordinary language? Clearly not, as this would mean no value could be placed upon the images and metaphors at work in centuries-old poems and paintings that might still be considered ‘beautiful’ by a contemporary audience. This would also run counter to the suggestion at the end of Davidson’s paper where a metaphor is described as having ‘beauty’, ‘aptness’ and ‘hidden power’ (45) whilst working *as* a metaphor. Kant seems to value the aesthetic symbol for being both novel *and*

reworkable. Whilst Davidson does seem to value metaphor for exhibiting both these traits, they do not, in themselves, seem a sufficient explanation: some metaphors, after all, may be deemed to be successful whilst not necessarily being new; others might be successful but may ultimately fail to be reworked into ordinary language. It looks as though something more is needed to explain why Davidson might value metaphor if the novelty thesis is insufficient. A possible answer, I suggest, might in fact lie with Kant's account of the nature of aesthetic experience.

As I outlined in the opening section of this paper, Kant's account of the free play of the imagination with the understanding in the experience of beauty occurs because no determinate concept can be found upon which understanding can rest. Instead, the perceiving subject's mental faculties enter into an imaginative play *as if* searching for a determinate concept. Because poetry is a self-conscious 'play' in this view,⁴ it automatically casts aside the conceptual constraints of everyday language and intimates a string of meanings that, understood literally, seem patently nonsensical (metaphors can, Davidson claims, be as open to assessment of truth or falsity as normal language, by virtue of meaning existing at the sentential level). The very existence of such poetic utterances invites this play of the imagination in order to search for a 'meaning' that transcends the literal. Hence, this play is *as if* a task of the understanding in its search for a determinable meaning and thus a determinate concept (hence, it appears purposive but without a purpose).

Crucially, this view assigns considerable power to the aesthetic symbol, power exercised over the perceiving subject by setting the latter's mental faculties into this particular purposive state: the metaphor is thus in control and can make the reader *act* in a certain way, simply because the novelty of the utterance requires a type of understanding that does not, at first, appear possible given existing conceptual and linguistic structures. The reader automatically engages in an imaginative search for a way to improve upon these conceptual structures in an

attempt to rationalise the aesthetic idea. My claim is that this casts metaphor as being peculiarly 'performative' in that it (apparently inevitably) brings about this particular mental state that is necessary if the metaphor is to be appreciated and consequently reworked by future generations.

I suggest that this notion of performativity might in fact lie at the heart of Davidson's view of metaphor. After all, he claims that paraphrase of a metaphorical expression is actually the attempt to describe what the expression brings to our attention: the content of our imaginative experience. Such experience, he suggests, cannot be readily communicated: as we have seen, it is 'often not propositional in character' (Davidson 1981: 44) and so cannot be expressed within the logical confines of ordinary language. If we follow the Kantian line of thought here, this experience is not propositional because it is not directly linked with a determinate concept and hence expression of any actual content of this experience is impossible. It looks as though Davidson's view, like Kant's, casts a particular imaginative state that operates without determinate concepts as an instinctual reaction to metaphor as its content will not seem commensurate with existing capacities for understanding at the level of meaning. In this way, metaphor is in fact doubly performative: as well as actively bringing about a certain mental state, it is also simultaneously a performance *against* existing language, drawing attention to its expressive inadequacy. This is of course consistent with the idea of a redescription of the world: the metaphor catachrestically re-works existing language and supports Kant's claim that future aesthetic symbols will consist largely of the old ones reworked and redescribed. It follows that if metaphors were *not* a performance against existing language we would not attempt paraphrase as the expression would be merely stating something in an ordinary way: it would, in J. L. Austin's terminology, be constative rather than performative.

This claim is supported by Davidson's stress on metaphor's *practical* nature. Metaphor, it seems, is fundamentally useful in pointing to and challenging the limiting structures of existing language (indeed, Rorty aptly calls it a 'tool' cf.

Rorty 1999:19). Davidson is explicit that ‘metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use. It is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences and depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of the sentences they comprise’ (Davidson 1981: 31). He later reiterates this: ‘What distinguishes metaphor is not meaning but *use* – in this it is like assertion, hinting, lying, promising, or criticizing’ (Davidson 1981: 41; my italics). To place metaphor in the same class as asserting, promising and criticizing is to view it as an explicitly performative linguistic act. According to Austin,

The name [i.e. ‘performative’] is, of course, derived from ‘perform’, the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something. (Austin 1980: 6)

‘Promising’ becomes contractually performative and ‘asserting’, for instance, declaratorily performative as by stating ‘I promise’ and ‘I assert that...’ the contractual and declaratory acts of promising and asserting are immediately brought about *as well as* the literal statement of each. (Austin believes that there are many more classes of performative than he outlines, but the contractual and declaratory cases nevertheless serve as excellent examples.) Metaphor, of course, does not follow these *specific* patterns, as the actual linguistic content of metaphor can vary massively. But it is still possible to view metaphor in general as bringing about a particular (Kantian) type of imaginative engagement regardless of the particular formal content of each utterance. In this respect, metaphor is consistent with performative acts like asserting and promising. Further,

The uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act (of betting or what not), the performance of which is also the object of utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the *sole* thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed. (Austin 1980: 8)

Uttering or reading the metaphor automatically brings about a particular imaginative state, but this is not *all* that happens, not ‘the *sole* thing necessary’: in this case (as we have seen) a metaphor must also be a performance against existing language if it is to be successful, drawing attention to the inability of such language to express certain ideas. As we know, this is exactly what ‘language is about... The point of the concept of linguistic meaning is to explain *what can be done with words*’ (Davidson 1981: 38; my italics).

It seems, then, that metaphor is a very practical phenomenon and its value seems to reside not just in its ability to redescribe (and to be redescrbed in turn), but also owing to its performing in such a way that it exerts considerable power over us in bringing about a certain mental state that draws attention both to the need for redescription *as well as* to the content of this mental state itself. Novelty is important, but it looks as though it is not *the* issue, as Davidson’s paper attests: the fact that some metaphors might be automatically literalised means that these should be considered to be less valuable metaphors as they fail to be performative in the way we have been considering: they do not draw attention to themselves as redescriptive possibilities and as a performance against existing language since they bring about no imaginative play. Instead, such metaphors seem complicit with – or simply a part of – existing language, and are therefore devoid of poetic power.

In both Kant’s and Davidson’s accounts metaphor appears to be valuable because of its ability to work as a type of performative utterance. Both thinkers value metaphor for revealing new ways of seeing brought about through an imaginative play that occurs in order to overcome the constraints imposed by existing language. Davidson shares Kant’s important association of the metaphor (in Kant’s case, the more generalised conception of the aesthetic symbol) with the experience of beauty and in attempting to ‘explain’ a metaphor, the critic ‘calls attention to the beauty or aptness, the hidden power, of the metaphor itself’ (Davidson 1981: 45). But this hidden power is fundamentally different to the type

envisaged by Kant, who assumes that there is a ‘meaning’ existing beyond the actual words; that is, transcendently. This is not the case in Davidson’s account: the imaginative experiences brought about by the metaphor are absolutely separable from the metaphor’s meaning (the literal meaning of the words used): meaning cannot transcend the literal, but imagination can. This is why metaphorical language and non-metaphorical language need to be understood as communicating in fundamentally different ways and is in fact parallel to the distinction Kant makes between oratory and poetry as operating largely with the understanding and the imagination respectively. Davidson’s account can therefore retain the Kantian suggestion that a metaphor encountered in poetry works by engaging the imagination as if it is a task of the understanding, a task that can never ultimately settle on a determinate concept and which cannot therefore be put into ordinary, propositional language: it is ‘a multitude of sensations and supplementary presentations for which no expression can be found’ (Kant 1987: 184).

Both thinkers thus clearly separate between language that performs and language that simply states and metaphor is valuable because it performs a necessary double function. On the one hand it destabilises our relationship to language by making the idea of ‘meaning’ problematic: it highlights the limitations of language by gesturing towards the incongruity between experiences and the linguistic apparatus in place for making sense of and communicating these experiences. At the same time it opens up possibilities for change by introducing new ways of perceiving – and consequently understanding – the world: vital both for poetry and for everyday communication.

Endnotes

¹ I borrow the term ‘performative’ from the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin (*How To Do Things With Words* (1980)). Although Austin himself abandoned his original distinction between constative and performative utterances, I believe they are nevertheless useful terms for drawing a distinction between two opposed linguistic ‘states’. A constative utterance (in my slightly modified construal of

Austin's terminology) is passive in the sense of merely stating something to be the case (which is of course open to verification), thus fulfilling no function *beyond* this act of stating. A performative utterance is active in the sense that its existence directly brings a particular state into being. Austin conceived this as pertaining to such cases where the act is achieved through speech: for example, 'I *name* this ship the Mary Rose', where the act of naming is brought about by the utterance of the statement. I am extending the application of performativity here by using it to describe utterances where a state is brought into being – regardless of whether this state directly involves an action explicitly described in the utterance – by the use of metaphor. This, as I will suggest as a result of my discussion of Kant's theory, is a particular kind of mental state.

² Cf. Andrew McGonigal (2002) 'Metaphor, Indeterminacy and Intention' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 42 (2), 179-190, where the issue of authorial intention is taken up in more detail.

³ i.e. where $f_1 = f^{-1}$ (where the reader's interpretation happens to coincide with the author's wish for a particular 'decoding').

⁴ 'The poet... promises little and announces a mere play with ideas...' (§51) (Kant 1987: 191)

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First Response

This is a shrewd and thoughtful essay, linking as it does Kant's notion of the indeterminacy of the aesthetic idea and Davidson's often puzzling 'What Metaphors Mean'. The argument that metaphors are essentially performative in their functioning is persuasive, as well as innovative in clarifying Davidson's stark claim that the meaning of a metaphor should be taken only as the literal meaning. Given this context of speech act theory, however, it is odd that the author makes no mention of John Searle's distinction between 'word or sentence meaning' (which is literal) and 'utterance meaning' (which constitutes the metaphorical use of an expression). While this would not necessarily have strengthened the association with Kant, it might have illuminated a number of linguistic complexities.

The concluding phase of the commentary is strong in its exploration of the ways in which metaphor may expose the limitations of propositional language through an appeal to imaginative engagement. Nonetheless, an explanation founded on the concept of a particular kind of mental event as characteristic of metaphor raises its own problems. How are such events to be accurately described and interpreted without lapsing into a circular justification through pre-existing linguistic features? The ingenuity of this analysis concomitantly lays it open to charges of evasion by shifting to a different conceptual terrain, one whose eighteenth century configurations still require sustained elucidation.

Finally, Mr Westley refers convincingly to Rorty's claim that 'a talent for speaking differently ... is the chief instrument of cultural change'. Yet this perception threatens to undermine his entire case through its implication that language may, in fact, be primarily or inherently figurative, with the propositional

or constative occupying a distinctly derivative status. Jacques Derrida offers a scintillating defense of this position in ‘White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy’. Clearly, the present essay must be read and evaluated on its own philosophical terms, although it would have been enriched by a more active meta-consciousness, which was alive to alternative debates on metaphor.