

Lunds Universitet
Filosofiska Institutionen
Handledare: Johannes Persson
2012-06-05

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1988-11-08
FTEK01

Truth and Metaphor

A presentation and discussion of two theories on how metaphors can be true

ABSTRACT

Metaphor is the most commonly discussed form of figurative language, and can most simply be presented as statements describing one thing as another. This paper is concerned with the issue of in what sense a metaphor can be said to be true. It outlines the main features of two different theories of metaphor: Donald Davidson's account of metaphor as presented in the article "What metaphors mean" (1978), and The Contemporary theory of metaphor, accompanied by an Experientialist theory of truth, mainly as it appears in *Metaphors we live by* (1980) by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Davidson claims that metaphorical sentences are always false and have no additional meaning or truth, but that the non-propositional insight the metaphor inspires can be true. The contemporary theory provides an account of metaphor which argues that what we recover from a metaphorical expression are structural mappings of one domain as another, grounded in experience. Arguments are offered in favour of explaining the non-propositional insights encountered in Davidson as mappings of this kind. Finally, a discussion is held on the possibility of explaining how the insights can be true, within the frames of an experientialist account of truth. It is concluded that while this is possible, it requires giving up some of the stronger claims made by Lakoff and Johnson.

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1. Introduction

Metaphor is one of the most interesting features of our language. To ignore metaphorical utterances and deem them meaningless or uninteresting, something going on in the curious periphery of language usage that is exclusive to poetry, seems to me plain foolish. It does strike me as obvious that a major chunk of our everyday use of language consists of metaphor, or at any rate expressions and sentences that cannot without further explanation be called literal in the strict sense of the word. Even so-called dead metaphors, from ‘bottleneck’ or ‘level of difficulty’ to ‘He was burned up’, on some level contain a figurative element that needs to be explained. The phenomenon of metaphor does however pose a difficulty for most traditional theories of language – we understand metaphorical expressions readily, even though the words used intuitively seem to have a different, or additional, meaning than the one they normally have. And perhaps more puzzling still is the fact that even though we know what is meant by a metaphor, and we usually can describe it roughly in different words, the dimension of understanding that results from seeing *one thing as another*, is always lost in the process. Explaining this is tricky business, and that is likely to be exactly why metaphor is sometimes shoved into a corner.

This essay is concerned with the question of how we can allow metaphors to be true, while plausibly explaining the important parts of what is peculiar to metaphor, namely the understanding one thing as another. Chapters Two and Three will present and review two theories of metaphor: that of Donald Davidson, and the Contemporary theory. Briefly Davidson can be introduced as claiming that metaphorical expressions are always false as sentences, while allowing the insight inspired by a metaphor to be true, whereas the contemporary theory holds that metaphorical expressions can be true, but only relative to some metaphorical conceptualization. Chapters Four and Five are more oriented towards discussion, and will research the possibility of combining the two accounts. First of all, however, we need to take a closer look at what we will mean in this essay by ‘metaphor’, and why it is relevant to ponder how such expressions can be said to be true.

1.1 What is metaphor?

The term metaphor is used quite loosely to refer to different kinds of figurative language, sometimes in philosophy also including concepts between which literary theory and criticism distinguishes, such as metonymy, hyperbole and synecdoche. While the distinctions between the above mentioned literary tropes are far from trivial or unnecessary in certain contexts, they all work through imagery in the sense of presenting or referring to one thing as another: one entity as another which is related/close to it (metonymy), one thing as an exaggeration of it (hyperbole)

and a part standing for the whole (synecdoche). These are only special cases or variations on what I argue is the heart of metaphor, namely the concept of *seeing one thing as another*. I will, however, for the sake of simplicity and to avoid confusion, examples in this essay will be primarily metaphors and not, say, hyperboles.

Moving on to some sample sentences, the most common form of metaphor is something along the lines of ‘A is a B’, one (kind of) thing is another (kind of) thing; Shakespearian ‘Juliet is the sun’ will do as a (rather tedious but typical) example, as will the slightly more complex ‘The river sweated oil and tar’ from T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, which is an example of a case where A is not the kind of thing that does B/has B/B can be applied to. Metaphors can also be extended over several sentences, as in the Emily Dickinson poem below:

The mountain sat upon the plain
In his eternal chair,
His observation manifold,
His inquest everywhere.
The seasons prayed around his knees,
Like children round a sire:
Grandfather of the day is he,
Of dawn the ancestor.

Also, there are more conventional metaphors, which some philosophers would call ‘dead metaphors’ – in itself a metaphor – such as ‘Sara and Robert’s relationship is a dead-end street’, ‘I have trouble digesting all these facts’, ‘She has reached a cross-roads in her life’ or ‘He bulldozed the committee into agreement’. This essay will not assume that there is some difference in kind between conventional and novel metaphor. There might be, and probably there is, some difference in how conscious and how fast our mental process of understanding and interpreting a metaphor is, depending on the conventionality of the metaphor; but that is likely to be a subject more fit for psychologists to explore and determine. To repeat what was said above on the terminology of figurative language: it works with the same principle, namely the seeing, talking about and understanding, one subject or thing as another.

1.2 Why care about the truth of a metaphor?

An observation about language, banal but basic, is that we do, intuitively, want to divide many of our sentences into true and false. It seems on some level to be a crucial condition for our ability to communicate intelligibly, and get on in the world. We assume that to hold a belief about something is to think it is true, to disbelieve what someone tells us is to think they claim a proposition that is false, and we act according to what we believe is the case – I don’t go down to the corner shop to buy milk if I don’t think your assertion that the shop is open is true. We typically assume a sentence to be true if it corresponds to the world as it is, and false if it does

not. Given this, a sentence like (1) ‘Grass is green’ can easily be said to be literally true (or false, should grass happen to have another colour). Things are not so simply solved with a metaphorical utterance such as (2) ‘The river sweated oil and tar’, or even (3) ‘He has passed on’, said of a dead person. Can we really say they are false? Of course, the river does not perspire with oil and tar due to a peak in body temperature, but do we want to call this utterance false? Not necessarily. And certainly, we do not want to say that (2) and (3) are meaningless – on the contrary, they seem to tell us a lot. But are they true in the same sense as (1)?

A common solution to the problem of how metaphor can be true though the sentence seems literally false, has been to assume that a metaphor may consist of a proposition that is literally false, but simultaneously imply another proposition that may be true; I say something false (3) but intend to convey the literal meaning of another proposition (3*) ‘‘He is dead’’, and (3*) is literally true. It obviously becomes more problematic with a case like (2) – it tells us something, but we don’t seem to be able to paraphrase it, or capture it all in some other sentence(s). Something essential, I believe inevitably, is lost in paraphrase even in the case of (3*). This something, again, is the understanding of the one thing as another, loosely put: In the case of (3) and (3*) there is a figurative element in (3) that is not present in (3*). This is the understanding of the person who has died as ‘passing on’, with the meaning that it has to us – spatially leaving the present place for another, disappearing out of sight, or something along those lines. In (3*), that someone is dead and hence no longer alive can be understood independently of the metaphorical element comparing death to spatially moving on.

Even if paraphrase could be plausibly argued in favour of, I am in no way convinced of the possibilities or even its usefulness. The ‘‘something’’ that is lost in a stab at paraphrasing metaphor, I believe must be the motivation for the employment of metaphor. Why else use it? Surely not solely for the sake of amusement – there is something we use and need metaphor for.

If so much of our language is, at some level, essentially metaphorical in nature, and, if truth is such an important concept in our communicating, we need to ask whether or not metaphors can be true, and, if they can, how. Since it seems they do give us true insights which do describe reality accurately, we need to explain how they do this. Most traditional theories of metaphor have assumed that a sentence used metaphorically is either patently false, uninformative or without truth-conditions. . In addition, many philosophers of language have in some way explained the concept of meaning in terms of the speaker knowing the objective truth-conditions of the sentence in question. It is a serious problem, I think, if this renders metaphors patently false, or not informatively true. What use do we have for an idea of the truth of statements that makes most of what we say false?

Donald Davidson has provided an account of metaphor which avoids many problems that have been raised against more traditional theories, while also being plausible since it preserves most of what is important about metaphor: its open-endedness, the impossibility of paraphrase, the importance of the actual words used, the richness of what metaphor makes us understand and what I consider must be the foundation of metaphor: seeing one thing *as* another. One might be surprised that the essay focuses on Davidson if the primary concern is the truth of metaphor, since his account is mostly famous for stating that metaphors mean nothing more or different from than what they literally mean, and therefore are patently false.

However, the interesting part is that Davidson for one is not nearly as hostile towards metaphor as it might seem on some interpretations (partly due to his own rhetorical style in the text). He has no quarrel with those who argue that metaphor is a powerful and a legitimate device of communication – he doesn't grant the metaphorical sentence truth, but he allows that what it inspires can be true. The essay at hand will explore this sense of truth for metaphors. Davidson does not say much explicitly about it, but his account will here be scrutinized and complemented with another theory of metaphor, namely the Contemporary Theory presented chiefly by George Lakoff (much inspired by Michael Reddy's article "The Conduit Metaphor" (1979)). It will be considered if this view of how a metaphor can be true, can cast light on what Davidson means when he writes that "Metaphor does lead us to notice what might not otherwise be noticed, and there is no reason, I suppose, not to say these visions, thoughts, and feelings inspired by the metaphor, are true or false".¹ He is on to something important in this vague passage of his article, that perhaps could make the whole account even more plausible if what he is hinting at were to be properly spelled out. The task of the paper at hand will be to first carefully outline the relevant parts of the two theories, and to decide what they together can tell us about how metaphors can be true.

¹ Davidson, Donald: "What metaphors mean" (1978) in Sacks, Sheldon (ed.): *On Metaphor*, Chicago 1979 s. 39

2. Donald Davidson on Truth, Meaning and Metaphor

Donald Davidson's paper "What Metaphors Mean" (1978) is one of the most well-known accounts of metaphor. Much of the article is devoted to arguing against other theories of metaphor, but he does present a positive suggestion of his own. He denies the notion that a metaphor should have any linguistic meaning at all in addition to the literal meaning of the words, and famously compares metaphor to "a bump on the head". The point of such a rather rich and eyebrow raising comparison is to underline the, in Davidson's view, non-linguistic character of figurative language – it belongs to a wider and more general set of mental capacities, and the images, feelings and the like that a metaphor is capable of generating in a reader or listener's mind cannot be located in the actual metaphor: "The common error is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself". Thus, the only meaning to, and the only proposition made by, a sentence such as "Sara and Robert's relationship is a dead-end street", is its literal meaning – which is blatantly false.² We shall see that this position on the truth-value and propositional content of metaphor is a necessity that follows from Davidson's theory of truth and meaning.

A theory of meaning for natural languages, Davidson stresses, needs to include a constructive account of compositionality. For creatures like humans, with finite mental capacities, to be able to learn a language and understand a possibly infinite amount of novel sentences in that language, the finite components of the language must have some fixed meaning apart from particular contexts of use.³ How, then, to determine this meaning? Davidson proposes in "Truth and Meaning" that to understand a sentence in a given language, is to know under what conditions it would be true and "to know the semantic concept of truth for a language is to know what it is for a sentence – any sentence – to be true, and this amounts to understanding the language".⁴

Davidson employs Alfred Tarski's theory of truth, because it does precisely what Davidson requires of a theory of meaning: it can generate a theorem for every possible sentence in a language to determine the truth conditions for it in a so-called T-sentence. A T-sentence has the form "*s* is true in language *L* if and only if *p*", where *s* is a sentence in the object-language *L* for which we want to present a theory of meaning, say Swedish, and *p* is a sentence in the meta-language describing the conditions where *s* is actually true. The stock example here is "Snö är vit is true in Swedish if and only if snow is white". This reductionist theory of meaning as truth-

² Davidson, Donald: "What metaphors mean" (1978) in Sacks, Sheldon (ed.): *On Metaphor*, Chicago 1979 p. 31

³ Lepore, Ernie and Ludwig, Kirk: "Introduction" in *The Essential Davidson*, New York 2006 p. 11

⁴ Davidson, Donald: "Truth and Meaning" (1967) in *The Essential Davidson*, New York 2006 p. 160f

conditions is an empirically testable theory, “we only need to ask, in sample cases, whether what the theory avers to be the truth conditions for a sentence really are”.⁵

There are many details of Davidson’s theory of meaning reducible to truth-conditions that can be discussed, improved and questioned. For our present purpose it is enough to know the consequences this has for his view of the truth of metaphor. It should be fairly obvious, that given such a theory of meaning – that it is reducible to truth-conditions – metaphors cannot have any special or additional meaning, in the same sense of the word. Meaning is truth-conditions, and to know the meaning of the sentence ‘Sara and Robert’s relationship is a dead-end street’ is thus to know the conditions under which it would be true; if and only if their relationship is a dead-end street. Since relationships are not the kind of things that can be dead-end-streets, to know the meaning of the sentence is to know that it is patently false. Not only is the falsity of the sentences used metaphorically necessary given Davidson’s account of meaning, but he also seems to argue that the falsity itself plays an important role in prompting the insight a metaphor is said to inspire. In the next section this idea will be examined.

2.1 Falsity

According to Davidson, we understand the sentence ‘Sara and Robert’s relationship is a dead-end street’ because ‘dead-end street’ means what it usually means – a street that doesn’t lead anywhere but to a place where you have to either stay or turn back from – and thus we quickly understand that it is, of course, false. *This*, that we understand it to be false, evokes mental images, a hunt for similarities between a certain kind of relationship and a dead-end street because “[g]enerally it is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as a metaphor and start to hunt out the hidden implication. It is probably for this reason that most metaphorical sentences are *patently* false” (Davidson allows that they can also occasionally be trivially true, as in ‘No man is an island’, but for the sake of simplicity I will stick to referring to their characteristic patent falsity).⁶

It seems then, that not only is the falsity of metaphors a necessary entailment given Davidson’s account of truth and meaning, but their falsity is also a crucial property that gives them their force to do what they do – evoke rich mental images in the interpreter. The importance of falsity to ‘activate’ the interpretation is an idea that Davidson shares with another well-known account of metaphor, namely that of John Searle. Searle’s pragmatic theory is an elaboration of Paul Grice’s theory of speaker-meaning and conversational implicature, where the speaker can be said to vouch for the truth of some other proposition than the one that the

⁵ Davidson 1967 p.161

⁶ Davidson 1978 p. 40

sentence he utters literally means, if the audience, when assuming that the speaker is co-operative, rational and following the general rules of conversation, can interpret his utterance to mean this other proposition.⁷ The general idea here is that we assume speakers to believe and say what is true rather than what is false, and that they are rational – therefore, when they say something that is blatantly false, nonsensical or irrelevant, we try to interpret them as meaning something other than what the utterance normally means.

When discussing conventional metaphors, Davidson writes that we don't get the same kind of vivid mental image from them as we do from more novel metaphors – presumably he means that this is so because they are not false: “‘He was burned up’ (...) may be true in one sense and false in another but (...) now suggests no more than that he was very angry. When the metaphor was active, we would have pictured fire in the eyes or smoke coming out of the ears.”⁸ I am not so sure one should make such sweeping generalizations, however. There is still an element of figurativeness in the expression ‘He was burned up’, as Davidson himself hints when he casually writes what we would have pictured “when the metaphor was active” – obviously it is still active in the sense that he conjures up some mental image that is his interpretation of the utterance and that seems to play a crucial part in the understanding of anger as something heated, almost explosive, for example.

Robyn Carston writes in a discussion of mental imagery in metaphor that she sees no reason for images “not to play essentially the same role” in conventional as they do in more elaborate and novel metaphor, although the latter might “induce more *attention* to accompanying imagery”. It is plausible that we indeed pay more attention to, are more conscious of, the process of construal when we interpret novel metaphor, but I don't think it is necessarily true that we don't get a distinct mental image from conventional metaphor too, with our understanding of the utterance being just as vivid. Carston considers that in “typical cases like ‘My lawyer is a shark’, ‘That surgeon is a butcher’, ‘He bulldozed the committee into agreement’, images of the lawyer as a shark, the surgeon as a butcher, and so on, are, according to many people, phenomenologically salient (we mentally ‘see’ the surgeon raising a butcher cleaver over the human body on the slab, for instance) (...). The difference would be one of degree – of time and effort expended on mental ‘looking’ at the image.”⁹

With respect to the *mental image* inspired or prompted by a metaphorical utterance, it seems to be correct that there need not be any difference in kind between conventional and novel

⁷ Lycan, William G.: *Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction* (2nd edition), New York 2008 p. 184f.

⁸ Davidson 1978 p. 36

⁹ Carston, Robyn: “Metaphor: Ad Hoc Concepts, Literal Meaning and Mental Images” in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society: Vol CX: Part 3* 2010 p. 314f., my italics

metaphor, and therefore not between what to Davidson would be on the one hand literally true, and on the other patently false. Rather it could be a difference in degree of how conscious we are of the process of forming and regarding the mental image. The mental image here is assumed to be of the surgeon *as* a butcher – of the one concept *as* the other. And this brings us back to what I have held to be the heart of metaphor and all figurative language – it is a question of understanding, seeing, one thing as another. What I think Davidson does when he claims that metaphors in some sense depend on their patent falsity for their effect, or rather, not on their being false due to their relation to reality but on us believing it, instantly, to be false, is to confuse the conventional meaning of the words with the falsity of the sentence. The words mean what they normally mean, and the mental image would typically be closely related to exactly this meaning of the words, and in a case of, say ‘The river sweated oil and tar’ this might be a surreal image, but I don’t think it is right to assume that we go from the recognition that it is false to forming a more or less fanciful mental image – I don’t think there typically is an important stage in the process when the interpreter is genuinely confused and tells herself ‘this is false/doesn’t make any sense, the speaker must mean something else’.

In fact, I would say that Carston’s thoughts that I have here elaborated on are more in harmony with the rest of Davidson’s account, because as I mentioned, emphasising the falsity of the proposition uttered is common to the pragmatic accounts of metaphor, and they normally assume that the listener will recover some other true (or false) *proposition* from the interpretation of the utterance after recognising it as literally false or nonsensical. Davidson does on the contrary argue that the important and informative part of the interpretation of metaphor is *non-propositional* in nature. So what we can conclude is that it is not the falsity that prompts the mental image of one thing as the other, but the words used and their normal, conventional meaning. We come to see the lawyer as a shark or the surgeon as a butcher, the dead person who has ‘left us’ as physically leaving the space we occupy not because we found this image when we looked for another way to understand sentences we recognized as false, but because this is what the words mean. In the next section we will look more closely at the role that the literal meaning of words plays in metaphor.

2.2. The Literal Meaning of the Words

“An adequate account of metaphor must allow that the primary or original meanings of words remain active in their metaphorical setting”, Davidson writes, while also noting that this is necessary even if we would want to postulate some additional or new metaphorical meaning in addition to the literal meaning. If the literal meaning were wholly inactive, “all sense of metaphor

would evaporate”.¹⁰ Some accounts of metaphor, for example what are sometimes called the pragmatic theories such as John Searle’s, claims that metaphor uses one proposition to communicate another. What happens when we grasp a metaphor, then, according to this view, is that we understand the literal meaning to be false or to not make any sense, and therefore we start looking for another proposition, one that it is more plausible the metaphor-maker meant to communicate. So we have on the one hand a proposition with cognitive content which is false or nonsensical, and on the other another proposition with a different cognitive content which makes more sense in the given context of communication.¹¹ Though these accounts do in various degree run in tandem with Davidson, for example in the case of a need for blatant falsity of the literal meaning in the expression used, as seen above, it is hard, with these accounts, to see a connection between what the words mean and what they are used by the metaphor-maker to mean. The expression used seems on the one hand to play no further role than being false or nonsensical, but still we use it to express a specific, different proposition. What is the role of the literal meaning of the words used, why would one use one proposition to communicate a wholly different one? And why should anything be lost in paraphrase? Carston, amongst others, points out there are several cases where the metaphors seem to depend entirely on the literal meaning of the words. The Tirrel-quote ‘If you find a student with a spark of imagination, water it’ is her example of the phenomenon of mixed metaphor, which illustrates this very well.¹² When we have interpreted ‘spark’ to mean something other than its literal meaning, we still need its literal meaning to make sense of the ingenuity of the expression.¹³

Within Davidson’s theory, I think this is fairly easily explained. An attempt at paraphrase lacks the force of the original metaphor simply because the literal meaning of the words used in the metaphorical expression is absent, and so it doesn’t trigger that insightful image in the interpreter. The actual point here, underlining that the force of metaphor resides in the actual words used with their literal meaning, is also brought forward well by Samuel L. Levin in a section of his paper “Language, concepts, and worlds”. He cites the Dickinson poem seen in chapter 1.1:

The mountain sat upon the plain
In his eternal chair,
His observation manifold,
His inquest everywhere.
The seasons prayed around his knees,
Like children round a sire:

¹⁰ Davidson 1978 p. 32

¹¹ Carston 2010 p. 299

¹² A mixed metaphor is a sentence that expresses two metaphorical ideas inconsistent with each other, leaping from one to the other, usually taking advantage of the conventionality of some metaphorical expression.

¹³ Carston 2010 p. 305

Grandfather of the day is he,
Of dawn the ancestor.

An ordinary interpretation looking to paraphrase what the above poem metaphorically means, would probably run something along the lines of the mountain being, as Levin writes, “high, old, and physically impressive”. This, if it is all the poem has to convey – a “rather ordinary poetic insight” – does indeed seem to rob the metaphors of some of their force. Levin proposes a view where “metaphor is assumed to mean nothing different from or more than what it says” and especially in poetry “the burden of construal falls on conceiving preternatural states of affairs – metaphoric worlds”. So on Levin’s account, the Dickinson poem does not say that a mountain is high, old and physically impressive with an inventive way of words, but instead we imagine a world, (or an image to stick with Davidson’s terminology), “in which the mountain has the properties the language of the poem attributes to it: it actually sits on an eternal chair, looks everywhere, has knees around which the seasons pray, and so on.”¹⁴

This view, I think, amplifies what Davidson says when he emphasises that metaphor gains its force from the literal meaning of the words. Levin also writes of his account that when metaphors are considered this way, “it is not language that is remarkable, it is the conception; that language is simply a faithful description of that conception”.¹⁵ It runs well with Davidson’s point that what is interesting about metaphor has little to do with the actual linguistic expressions, which only trigger remarkable mental images.

2.3 The Truth of an Image?

Davidson does, interestingly, allow for some kind of metaphorical truth.¹⁶ He writes:

[T]he sentences in which metaphors occur are true or false in a normal, literal way, for if the words in them don’t have special meanings, sentences don’t have special truth. This is not to deny that there is such a thing as metaphorical truth, only to deny it of sentences. Metaphor does lead us to notice what might not otherwise be noticed, and there is no reason, I suppose, not to say these visions, thoughts, and feelings inspired by the metaphor, are true or false.¹⁷

This is a remark made in passing, but it is worth dwelling on. What is it that is actually said? First of all, of course, what we concluded earlier: If meaning is reducible to truth-conditions, then there can be no other meaning that a metaphorical expression has, additional to its literal truth-value.

¹⁴ Levin, Samuel R.: “Language, concepts, and worlds” in *Metaphor and thought* (2nd edition) by Ortony, Andrew (ed.), Cambridge 1993, p.122

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The terms ‘metaphorical truth’ and ‘truth of metaphor’ will here be used interchangeably

¹⁷ Davidson 1978 p.39

The above assumes some, it might seem, rather uncontroversial, claims about truth and falsity. First, it assumes that truth and falsity is a property that a propositional sentence has. A propositional sentence cannot be both true and false (genuinely ambiguous expressions, like the one Davidson mentions ‘He was burned up’, obviously can be ‘true in one sense but false in another’, which he claims not to be due to it having one metaphorical and one literal meaning, where the first is true and the second false, but that it has come to have two different literal meanings), a doctrine commonly referred to as the principle of bivalence which few philosophers and perhaps also few people in general are intuitively prepared to give up. Also, truth is not a matter of degree. Either a sentence is true, or it isn’t. And when is it true? When it (or the sentence’s logical form, which complex expressions might have to be transformed into to lay bare it’s truth conditions) satisfies Convention T, if we accept Davidson’s account. This can also, in a more general way be expressed as when the sentence ‘fits reality’ or is an accurate description of how things really are, it is true. This is a version of what can usually be called an objectivist account of truth. Given this, as had already been discussed, Davidson holds that metaphorical sentences are false, because they don’t express anything apart from their literal meaning, which is patently false.

“This is not to deny that there is such a thing as metaphorical truth, only to deny it of *sentences*”¹⁸, Davidson continues. If the sentence is false, what is it that can simultaneously be true about the metaphor? Apparently, Davidson means that what metaphor “leads us to notice” is what can be true. Or, at least he sees “no reason, I suppose, not to say these visions, thoughts, and feelings inspired by metaphor, are true or false”. So the proposition expressed by the metaphorical sentence is false, but what it inspires, the interpretation so to speak, can be true or false. This is allowed under the principle of bivalence since the sentence *is* not identical with the interpretation or thought-work associated with it.

How can “visions, thoughts, and feelings” have a truth-value? Supposedly, if we are talking about truth in the same sense as we did above, they will at least have to fit reality. Davidson writes that “there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character”. He compares it to a map, an etching, a photograph – “A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture”.¹⁹ Inspired by the notion of ‘picture’, let us say that what metaphor in general makes us notice can be called *image*: an image in this sense then lacks propositional character but somehow incorporates within its concept what Davidson here calls

¹⁸ Ibid. my italics

¹⁹ Ibid. p.44f.

“visions, thoughts, and feelings.” It is important to note that the metaphorical expression itself is not an image – we are now considering the interpretation of the metaphor. Also, an image is not interchangeable for any number of propositions, which is implicit in the comparison made above by Davidson, and perhaps even more so in his refusal to acknowledge paraphrasability of metaphor. If what the metaphor says and what we interpret from it, were only a number of propositions, “why should it be so difficult or impossible to set [them] out? (...) Can’t we, if we are clever enough, come as close as we please?”²⁰ He infers from this inevitable loss in paraphrase, that what metaphor triggers in us must be something else – an image of non-propositional nature.

There is no reason, according to Davidson, to say that these images can’t be true or false. If such an image can be true, there must be a way that something non-propositional can be true. In what way can this be? If they are non-propositional, we cannot very well construct T-sentences out of them. Returning to the more loose idea of being true defined as “fitting reality”, a lot of questions needs to be dealt with. How does an image fit or accurately describe reality? Does it have to fit it in detail, like a sharp photograph with high resolution? That does not seem plausible, and neither does the idea that one would ever have such a mental image of reality, nor that metaphor would in general inspire it. Of course, it could be theoretically possible to have such an image, only that we never do, and therefore what a metaphorical sentence inspires *could* be true, only it is in practice always (like the literal meaning of the actual metaphorical expression) false.

This is not very helpful if we want to explain why we experience metaphorical expressions to be true or false. Obviously it does not hurt Davidson’s account of metaphor if this is the only available explanation of how what metaphors inspire could be true. But I don’t think it is what he has in mind, either. The allowance for truth for the images metaphor makes us notice, seems motivated by the strong intuition that there is indeed something the metaphorical expressions make us see that we want to be able to call true or false.

Mental images are, I think most of us can agree, rarely if ever copies or exact prints of reality. They usually highlight and emphasise some dimensions of the state of affairs they illustrate, and downplay or altogether ignore others. Imagining or remembering something, your childhood home, the face of a lover or the carton of milk in the fridge is different from having it visually in front of you. Your mental image will perhaps have preserved the rough structure and a lot of detail, but it will be different and although we do not want to say that it is not an image that is true to reality (though of course it *may* be incorrect or unfair to reality as it is). Indeed, it has been

²⁰ Ibid. p. 42

pointed out by Colin McGinn (cited by Carston) that “it is (...) not possible to imagine an object while actually seeing it”, a notion also stressed by amongst others Wolfgang Iser and Gilbert Ryle.²¹ This highlights the distinction between actually seeing something, as in having the relevant sensory organs excited, processing it in the visual cortex and so on, on the one hand, and imagining something, as in seeing it with our ‘mind’s eye’, on the other hand.

The images evoked by a metaphor, I think, are best understood as the latter. Recalling the earlier notion of the heart of metaphor being seeing one thing as another, and suggesting that this is roughly the kind of image one might recover from a metaphor – of one thing as another, where the relevant dimensions are highlighted and others downplayed – I here wish to introduce what Davidson calls *seeing as*, to be kept distinct from *seeing that*. Consider the following passage:

“Seeing as is not seeing that. Metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts this insight. Since in most cases what the metaphor prompts or inspires is not entirely, or even at all, recognition of some truth or fact, the attempt to give literal expression to the content of the metaphor is simply misguided”.²²

Metaphor inspires a *seeing as*-experience in the interpreter. Presumably this *seeing as* is another way of putting the ‘mental image’ idea. *Seeing that* could then be primarily actually seeing something, coming to know some fact – that my pen has blue ink, say – by *seeing that* it is so, whereas when I read ‘She cried tears of blue ink, sad words staining the page of her notebook’ I can see the activity of writing a poem *as* the activity of crying.

The sentence about what metaphor prompts as “not entirely, or even at all, recognition of some truth or fact” is a little bit puzzling. If this is not a contradiction of Davidson’s earlier supposition that the visions inspired by metaphor can be true or false, then it at least appears to undermine the idea that he is even the least bit serious about granting some sort of truth to them. Perhaps he does indeed not see the importance in pursuing the issue any further, but this essay does. I wish therefore to suggest that what is claimed in the above passage is that the *seeing as*-experiences, the mental images, are not true in the same sense as a proposition like ‘Snow is white’ which can be put to the Convention T-test, and therefore they do not have semantic meaning in the same sense, either, assuming that ‘facts’ are propositionally expressed. This does seem to make sense, since they, by definition, are not propositional in character. But can it then be true in another sense – a sense in which an image, a *seeing as*-experience can be true? What sense might that be?

To summarise what we have so far said about Davidson, there are a few things of his account that we want to keep, and a few others that we can safely lose. One important thing is of course

²¹ Carston 2010 p. 312 and Iser, Wolfgang: ” Läsprocessen – en fenomenologisk betraktelse”(1976) in Entzenberg, Claes (ed.): *Modern Litteraturteori: Från rysk formalism till dekonstruktion* Lund: Studentlitteratur 1993 p. 329, respectively

²² Davidson 1978 p. 45

the emphasis on thought rather than single expressions – the metaphor evokes so much more in the interpreter than can be located in the actual metaphorical sentence. Related to this is the richness of the image, which also implies the impossibility of a literal paraphrase. This is further argued for by stressing that the interpretation is not propositional in nature – this is the reason why it cannot be put in to some set of propositions that can substitute for the actual metaphor.

Thanks to the locus of metaphor being placed in the mind rather than in the words, we can also accept the fact that Davidson says the sentences are false – since he allows for the interpretations inspired by them to be true. These interpretations, images, are accomplished by the words used in the metaphorical sentence being used to mean what they conventionally mean – ‘the sun’ denotes the sun and ‘dead-end street’ denotes some dead-end street. The importance of this Davidson correctly stresses, but he grants too much significance to the *falsity* of the sentence. The falsity of metaphorical statements is a consequence of his theory of truth and meaning, saying that the words mean what they literally mean, but the resulting falsity is not, it was argued, an active or important property of the sentence for the interpretation.

We will later try accessing what could be meant when it is said that the image of interpretation can be true, sticking with the above points of the account and the important notion of *seeing as*, which I have claimed to be the foundation of what metaphor is and how it works. First, let us in the next two chapters look at another theory of metaphor and how it handles the question of truth.

3. The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's book *Metaphors we live by*, first published in 1980, is an ambitious and detailed account of the phenomenon of metaphor. I lack the space to do all aspects of it justice, but a number of its principal features will be useful when trying to make sense of the way in which Davidson allows metaphors, or rather the interpretations of them, to be true. Lakoff later dubs the theory the Contemporary theory of metaphor, a label I will be using as well in the following when referring to the general features of the theory.

Prominent throughout the theory is the conviction that metaphor is prevalent in our daily speech, not some oddity reserved for poetry and word play. Metaphors are tools for understanding the world around us – in fact, regarding some abstract concepts (time or love, for instance) we have no way of talking about or comprehending them other than the metaphorical: Metaphor is “not a figure of speech, but a mode of thought”.²³ Note here the parallel to Davidson, who, as mentioned above, sees the remarkable force of metaphor as something that lies primarily outside linguistics, belonging to a more general set of mental abilities. Lakoff writes that “the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another”.²⁴ The contemporary theorists, then, are concerned not chiefly with the single linguistic expressions, but with concepts.

The central idea is something called *conceptual mapping*. In metaphor, we map one concept (the source domain) onto another concept (the target domain), meaning that we apply our knowledge of the source domain when accessing the target domain. This is what happens when we speak of life as a journey, for example. Our concept of journeys, in this case, is described in the Contemporary theory as an *experiential gestalt*. An experiential gestalt is a prototype idea, a generalization grounded in experience (direct or indirect), of what a journey is, which involves certain dimensions, say, that it has an outset and a goal, it might have a purpose, there might be several paths to choose from, guides along the way, a map to follow at will, and so on.²⁵ We map this experiential gestalt onto another concept – life, in this case – and thus come to understand life through our knowledge of the journey-concept. From the metaphorical concept LIFE-IS-A-JOURNEY, an open-ended range of metaphorical expressions can be inferred. We speak, for example, of ‘being at a *cross-roads in one's life*’, ‘he's *lost his direction* completely’, ‘she never intended to *end up here*’, ‘she *made her way through* a difficult period of time’, ‘I've been *stuck* in this situation

²³ Lakoff, George: “Contemporary Theory of Metaphor” (1993) in *Metaphor and thought* (2nd edition) by Ortony, Andrew (ed.), Cambridge 1993 p. 210

²⁴ Ibid. p. 203

²⁵ A lengthy example of what can typically be involved in an experiential gestalt can be found (just one example of many throughout the book, in fact) in Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p.167f.

for more than a year' and these expressions can all be inferred from the metaphorical concept of LIFE-IS-A-JOURNEY.

There is an important systematicity to conceptual mappings. Lakoff writes that “[t]he mapping is tightly structured. [...] There are ontological correspondences according to which entities in the [target] domain correspond systematically to entities in the [source] domain”.²⁶ The correspondence guarantees that the logic of the source domain is withheld in the interpreters’ accessing of the target domain, which allows us to reason about the target domain in terms of the source domain. Using again the above example LIFE-IS-A-JOURNEY, we can reason about life in terms of a journey: being lost in life involves dimensions like having no clear purpose or goal, alternatively no idea about how to reach them, having to stop and think to not risk straying even further off, etcetera. So does being lost on a journey. The relations between the dimensions of the concept of a journey are mapped onto the concept of life, preserving the structure, and thus we can *reason metaphorically* about life in terms of a journey, telling someone who complains he is *lost to stop and think* about *where* he wants to be in a few years, and this can be perfectly coherent. Lakoff calls this the Invariance Principle: “One should (...) think of the Invariance Principle in terms of constraints on fixed correspondences: if one looks at the existing correspondences, one will see that the Invariance Principle holds; source domain interiors correspond to target domain interiors, source domain exteriors correspond to target domain exteriors, and so forth”.²⁷ We think of the one thing in terms of another, and the linguistic expressions used follow suit.

The same idea is elaborated in Lakoff and Turner when they speak of image mapping, common especially in poetry but also in idioms. An instance of image mapping can be seen in the famous André Breton line ‘My wife whose waist is an hourglass’ where one image is superimposed so to speak, on another, in this case an hourglass onto a woman’s figure. The difference between concept mapping and image mapping is supposed to be that an image mapping is generally richer in detail, and more case specific. However, the general theory of metaphor is the same in all cases, image mapping and concept mapping are not different in kind but in the scope of applicability: “Metaphoric image mappings work in the same way as all metaphorical mappings: by mapping the structure of one domain onto the structure of another. But here, the domains are mental images”.²⁸ The Invariance Principle works here as well, they suggest. “[M]ental images are structured by image-schemas and (...) image metaphors preserve image-schematic structure, mapping parts onto parts, and wholes onto wholes, containers onto

²⁶ Lakoff 1993 p. 207

²⁷ Ibid. p. 215

²⁸ Lakoff, George and Turner, Mark: *More than Cool Reason*, Chicago 1989 p. 90

containers, paths onto paths, and so on.”²⁹ Both image and conceptual mappings also evoke experiential gestalts; we bring the experience of the one domain into the accessing and understanding of the other, so we know, for example, how the image of the hourglass is to be fitted onto a woman’s figure without the expression saying explicitly which part, just as it doesn’t tell us which dimensions to map from one concept onto another.

Due to the structural systematicity in the mapping, the contemporary theory readily explains how we can understand novel metaphorical expressions as extensions of a conventional metaphors like LIFE-IS-A-JOURNEY. When hearing, for instance, ‘He had always thought that he, compared to his peers, had set out well prepared, but now, at the age of 35, he found nothing in his luggage to help him cope with the situation’, the interpreter can use her knowledge of journeys to instantly understand that, luggage being something that a traveller brings with him when he sets off, the sentence refers to a person finding something he carries with him from the early years of life, perhaps a wealthy background and a self-confidence that came with it, surprisingly enough not sufficient to cope with a difficulty he encounters in life. In fact, without the idea of a conceptual mapping that extends beyond the single linguistic expression, it is not as easy to explain why there are so many coherent metaphorical expressions that all describe life in terms of a journey.³⁰ The above was an example of an extension of a conventional metaphor, but it works the same way with very much more novel and surprising metaphors. Presumably, since so much of our language is more or less conscious conceptual mapping, it is a process we are used to, and on an encounter with a very inventive metaphor we tackle it with a structural mapping, seeing the target domain as the source domain in the relevant terms.

After this brief walkthrough of how the contemporary theory explains what it is that metaphorical expressions accomplish, what they evoke in their interpreters, let us in the next section take a look at what they have to say about how metaphors can be true.

3.1. The Experientialist Account of Truth

The contemporary theory of metaphors puts emphasis again and again on *experience*. The relevant likeness between life and a journey is not that the two share some objective properties, neither do ideas we metaphorically digest and food have anything objectively in common (and certainly one *is* not the other), but that they share experiential properties. This is why metaphor can also create new similarities, like when we expand the mapping to cover nonconventional parts of the concepts – we see a likeness, often a new and surprising one as many theorists point out, but it is

²⁹ Lakoff 1993 p. 231

³⁰ Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark: *Metaphors we live by* Chicago 1980 p.151

not a likeness between some inherent properties of the two domains that we just didn't notice before: "In general, similarities do exist, but they cannot be based on *inherent* properties. The similarities arise as a result of conceptual metaphors and thus must be considered similarities of *interactional*, rather than inherent, properties."³¹ Talking about life in terms of a journey makes sense not because they have something in common but because when we apply the experiential gestalt of journeys on to our conception of life, and see one as the other, we also see the likeness between our experiences of them. The similarities are in this sense created by the conceptual metaphor, not there for us to notice independent of our experience through concepts.

The contemporary theory of metaphor embraces what Lakoff and Johnson calls an Experientialist account of truth. Basically, the following claim is said by the authors themselves to be the foundation of the account:

(E) "We understand a statement as being true in a given situation when our understanding of the statement fits our understanding of the situation closely enough for our purposes"³²

A formulation like the above might raise some eyebrows, involving as it does at least some notion of subjectivism or an operational definition of what truth is if it just has to fit "close enough" for "our purposes". On my interpretation, this account is underpinned by a few assumptions it might be worth spelling out, and taking it through its paces makes the account, I reckon, more plausible.

(E1) "A theory of truth is a theory of what it means to understand a statement as true or false in a certain situation"³³.

(E2) Truth is mediated by our understanding – we understand a statement but we also understand a situation.³⁴

(E3) Understanding requires some conceptual system.³⁵

(E4) Any human conceptual system is mostly metaphorical in nature.³⁶

Truth, then, is always relative to a conceptual system since we cannot understand a statement or its truth-value without a conceptual system. (E1) is not particularly hard to accept, on a closer scrutiny. A theory about the truth and falsity of statements involves, of course, language. It is, I think, incoherent to talk about language without regard to human understanding. It would assume that natural language is something independent of the humans that use it, that there is something to language outside and apart from the actual practicing of it. (There can of course be

³¹ Ibid. p. 215

³² Ibid. p. 179

³³ Ibid. p. 180

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 6

such a thing as potential and possible statements with a truth-value that no one has yet made and perhaps never will make, but surely these are dependent even for their potential existence on the meaning and truth-value of actual statements.) Indeed, (E1) settles close to the davidsonian account of meaning – to know what a statement means is to know the conditions under which it would be true, and to ‘know the meaning’ of something surely amounts to ‘understanding’ it.³⁷ Then, recognising what circumstances would distribute truth-value to a statement is the same thing as understanding it. Can a sentence have truth-value without someone understanding it? Can there be understanding without concepts? Can there be understanding without some ‘understander’ (real or hypothetical)? These queries seem to be the same as whether expressions of language can have meaning independent of human cognition. It is a large matter we cannot here discuss in any detail, but it does take us back to one of the motivations for this essay – even if we can make sense of truth for statements independent of our actual usage of language, what use is that?

“Concepts are cognitive in nature; that is, they are part of human cognition”, Lakoff and Turner writes.³⁸ And Davidson: “We may identify conceptual schemes with languages, (...) [l]anguages we will not think of as separable from souls; speaking a language is not a trait a man can lose while retaining the power of thought. So there is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shredding his own.”³⁹ One can have different takes on conceptual systems, whether there can be many incommensurable ones or not, and there are more and less basic concepts, of course. One might want to call them something different than ‘concepts’. But I do think it is hard to argue that there are no such things as concepts, that make an organized cognition possible, and that language is dependent upon it. Therefore, I also find it hard to coherently deny (E3).

Regarding (E2), the relation to (E) can clearly be seen – to be able to say a statement is true we need to “match” it with our experience of the state of affairs it concerns. “It is because we understand *situations* in terms of our conceptual system that we can understand *statements* using that system of concepts as being *true*, that is, fitting or not fitting the situation as we understand it. Truth is therefore a function of our conceptual system.”⁴⁰ The quote carries with it the implication that our basic cognition is mediated by concepts, since we understand situations, i.e. states of affairs, the world to us, through them. We might, obviously, misunderstand a situation as well as a statement, and when we misunderstand a state of affairs we may judge a statement to

³⁷ Davidson 1967 p. 160f.

³⁸ Lakoff & Turner 1989 p. 111

³⁹ Davidson, Donald: “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” (1974) in *The Essential Davidson*, New York 2006, p. 197f.

⁴⁰ Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 179

be true when it is in fact false, or vice versa. This is not hindered by understanding being understanding relative to a conceptual system.

As for (E4), even if one might try to reject it on some a priori grounds, the contemporary theorists argue extensively and with plenty of empirical examples for the fact that many of our concepts are metaphorical in nature, stressing the fact that even if metaphorical expressions and metaphorical uses of words have gained a spot in the printed dictionaries and might in that sense literally mean something additional (e.g. ‘bottleneck’) the *understanding* is via a metaphorical concept – just because it is not conscious does not mean it is not an active process. The most conventional metaphors are “reflections of systematic metaphorical concepts that structure our actions and thoughts. They are ‘alive’ in the most fundamental sense: they are metaphors we live by. The fact that they are conventionally fixed within the lexicon of English makes them no less alive”.⁴¹

If our conceptual system is largely built on metaphorical understanding, it should be considered that metaphor, according to the contemporary theorists, is usually partial mapping – it “highlights some aspects of (...) experience, downplays others, and hides still others.”⁴² The LIFE-IS-A-JOURNEY conceptualization underlines certain aspects of our experience of life, like the notion of making progress towards a destination or a goal, while it might not highlight the same aspects of our experience of life as does the famous ‘All the world is a stage’-quote from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Also, some aspects of our experience of journeys (or theatre plays for that matter) might not be mapped over onto our concept of life at all. And if judging the truth value of a statement requires an understanding of that statement, and understanding always is in terms of some conceptual system, which is largely metaphorical in nature, then it seems to follow that understanding is partial at least when it comes to metaphorical understanding. This would mean that there is no access to any whole, objective truth – in other words, the only truth it makes sense to talk about is truth relative to our conceptual system, which we cannot understand anything independent of.

Returning to (E), the formulation “closely enough for our purpose” needs some examination. What purpose, exactly, might this be? I don’t think that the idea is some operational definition of truth, or even a pragmatic one that wants to capture how we loosely use truth in our everyday speech. On the experiential truth account, words have meaning because they stand for concepts. Concepts are assumed to be a crucial part of human cognition – of course our concepts are constrained by reality, since concepts are pragmatic in the sense that their *purpose*, our purpose, is to aid us in functioning in our interaction with the real world and each other: “[o]ur conceptual

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 55

⁴² Ibid. p.149

system emerges from our constant successful functioning in our physical and cultural environment. [...] The physical world is what it is. Cultures are what they are. People are what they are. People successfully interact in their physical and cultural environment. They are constantly interacting with the real world. Human categorization is constrained by reality, since it is characterized in terms of natural dimensions of experience that are constantly tested through physical reality and cultural interaction.”⁴³

So a metaphorical utterance can indeed be true, given a certain conceptualization, according to the contemporary theory: “When we conceptualize life as a journey or birth as arrival, then our statements about life or birth can be true or false relative to those metaphorical conceptualizations. For example, it can be true that he has no direction in life or that he has taken a slow, hard path or that he had a head start in life. But these things can be true only if one conceptualizes life via the LIFE-IS-A-JOURNEY metaphor.” This truth, however, is not absolute – “since conceptual frameworks are products of the human mind, the structure of reality *as it is reflected in language* is not objective in the technical sense, that is, not *mind-free*”.⁴⁴

To summarise this chapter, we can see that there are quite a few linkages between the contemporary theory, and Davidson’s view, and that they complement each other. While Davidson preserves much of what is important about metaphor, and manages to keep focus on the interpretation, his account of what this image inspired by the metaphor is like is very thin – he only says it is open-ended, vivid and not interchangeable for any number of propositions. Also he does not explain how metaphorical expressions can be connected with each other – why, for example, so many of them describe life as a journey. The contemporary theory also concentrates on the thought-part of metaphor, but tells us much more. It elaborates on the details about how this works: interpretations are not random because the mappings are structured and the interpretations are grounded in experience which explains why the image is so much richer than what the expression says. Also, it does have an account of why and how many conventional expressions describe the same domain as the same other domain.

Davidson argues in a much more structured and formal way than do the contemporary theorists I have been considering, but I would still like to explore the possibility that they can be meshed in some productive way. In the following two chapters, I will study first if the mappings described in the contemporary theory can be used to explain what Davidson means when he fuzzily talks of “visions, thoughts and feelings” that may be true, and then if we could understand in what way they can be true using the experiential account of truth without violating any foundations of his theory.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 180f.

⁴⁴ Lakoff & Turner 1989 p. 118, my italics

4. Can “visions, thoughts, and feelings” be mappings?

The contemporary theory of metaphor allows that metaphors can be true because truth according to them is always relative to some conceptual system, and a metaphorical statement can thus be true given a certain metaphorical conceptualization. The contemporary theorists do write that it is the statements that are true and that “issues of truth are among the least relevant and interesting issues that arise in the study of metaphor. The real significance of the metaphor (...) is that, in getting us to try to understand how it could be true, it makes possible a new understanding of [the target domain].”⁴⁵ The above quote is slightly confusing since they also, on various occasions claim that metaphor and its prevalence everywhere in our language actually motivates a different concept of truth and meaning than the widely accepted objectivism.⁴⁶ It seems that the point of the odd quote above, is that the truth of the single *statement* is relatively uninteresting because what is interesting and powerful about metaphor is not the statements but the conceptualizations that make them true. Consider when Lakoff writes that though metaphors map the propositional structure of one domain onto another (the systematicity of linguistic correspondences noted above):

[M]appings themselves are not propositions. If mappings are confused with names for mappings [e.g. LIFE-IS-A-JOURNEY or DEATH-IS-DEPARTURE, my remark], one might mistakenly think that, in this theory, metaphors are propositional. They are anything but that: metaphors are mappings. That is, sets of conceptual correspondences.⁴⁷

The metaphorical statements inferred from the conceptual mapping are true relative to that conceptualization only, which makes the mapping the interesting part. Compare this with Davidson. He claims that metaphorical statements are trivially false. What they inspire or evoke though, the thought-part that is, can be true. I would like to propose that what Davidson in a rather flimsy way describes as “visions, thoughts, and feelings” is in fact best understood as the conceptual mapping in the contemporary theory. Davidson says little of the character of the insights evoked by metaphor, but he does say that:

- (1) What metaphorical expressions make us notice is (in general) not propositional in character.
- (2) “Metaphor makes us see one thing as another by making some literal statement that inspires or prompts the insight”.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 175

⁴⁶ See for example Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 184

⁴⁷ Lakoff 1993 p. 207

⁴⁸ Davidson 1978 p. 45

(3) What metaphors evoke is not somehow transmitted from maker to interpreter via the vehicle of the statement; there is no ‘encoded message’.

(1) – (3) can be found in the contemporary theory of metaphor as well. (1) Is reflected in the constant emphasis on thought, not language, as the locus of metaphor, and in the Lakoff quote above. Metaphors are mappings, and mappings are as we have seen, conceptualization of one domain in terms of another – and I do not think it is unreasonable or unsound to say that this is the same thing as what Davidson is getting at when he writes that “metaphor makes us see one thing as another”.⁴⁹ Mapping involves just this – seeing, or understanding, one thing *as* another. And this insight can be true, according to Davidson. The contemporary theory holds that the statement can be true *given* the metaphorical conceptualization.

Moving onto (2) it also involves the importance of the fact that the words don’t have any additional or special meaning in Davidsons account. They mean what they normally mean, that’s why the statement is trivially false and it is in virtue of their normal meaning that the words prompt the insight they do. This is also preserved on the contemporary account. In considering some quotes from poems (Dylan Thomas’ ‘don’t go gentle into that good night’ and Allen Tate’s ‘Alice.../Declines upon her lost and twilight age’) Lakoff and Turner write that “It is the conceptual work that lies behind the language that makes metaphor what it is. Metaphorical language is not something special. It is the language that conventionally expresses the source-domain concept of a conceptual metaphor. Thus, in the lines above, ‘twilight’ conventionally denotes twilight and ‘night’ conventionally denotes night. It is the conceptual metaphor A-LIFETIME-IS-A-DAY that maps twilight onto old age and night onto death.”⁵⁰ So, the words in a metaphorical expression mean what they normally mean – it is the conceptual mapping of one domain onto the other that generates the insight allowing us to view lifetime as a day, we of course must understand that twilight means twilight and not something else, for it to evoke our experiential gestalt of twilight.

As for (3), Davidson stoutly denies, “that associated with a metaphor [there] is a cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message.” He continues; “we imagine there is a content to be captured when all the while we are in fact focusing on what metaphor makes us notice. If what the metaphor makes us notice were finite in scope and propositional in nature (...) we would simply project the content the metaphor brought to mind onto the metaphor. But in fact there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in

⁴⁹ Davidson 1978 p. 45

⁵⁰ Lakoff & Turner 1989 p. 138

character.”⁵¹ The claim is related to his denial that paraphrase of metaphor is possible – and I think this too can be accommodated within the contemporary theory of what metaphor is. For one thing, it also denies paraphrasability of metaphor, and this for a couple of different reasons. It “fails to account for both the inferential and conceptualizing capacity of metaphor”, i.e. it can’t explain the metaphorical reasoning mentioned above in the part about the Invariance principle and the systematicity of mapping.⁵² The reason that metaphor is not paraphrasable according to neither Davidson nor the contemporary theory, then, is similar: when Davidson writes that “there is no end to what we want to mention” when asked what a metaphor “means” he compares it to a map, a photograph, an etching; the “idea of finishing would have no clear application”.⁵³ This is vague, probably deliberately so, but the heart of it would not be damaged by having the mapping-idea of the contemporary theory applied to it. The contemporary theory also denies that metaphor means anything that can be stated in some finite list of propositions, because the purpose of metaphor is understanding, the mapping is seeing one thing as another, and as Davidson points out, “[s]eeing as is not seeing that”.⁵⁴ Seeing and speaking of life *as* a journey, ideas as food that can be digested or love as a collaborative work of art, then, is not to claim *that* life *is* a journey, *that* ideas *are* food etc., but doing just that: seeing it *as*. So following Davidson then, the literal claim that life is a journey may be literally false, but can in some sense be true through the peculiar power of metaphor is that gives us the insight of seeing life as a journey.

Davidson writes that he thinks “metaphor belongs exclusively in the domain of use”.⁵⁵ We use it to accomplish some effect, then. How can this be understood from the point of view of the contemporary theory? I don’t think it needs to be too tricky. When we think about ‘use’ we might associate to performatives and illocutionary acts, but thinking about ‘use’ in a broader sense, which I think Davidson does, we can easily imagine the ‘use’ being to emphasise some dimensions of a domain or image, downplay others through making a metaphor that does this – and thereby prompt the interpreter to *understanding*, which I think is a key word in the context. You can use a sentence to make someone understand something, see one thing as another or from a certain point of view.

Since Davidson rejects the idea of some propositional content to be transmitted from metaphor maker to interpreter, he has been criticized by amongst other William Lycan for allowing that no interpretation of a metaphor is ever a misinterpretation. Lycan means that it is

⁵¹ Davidson 1978 p. 44

⁵² Lakoff & Turner 1989 p. 120f.

⁵³ Davidson 1978 p. 44f.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.45

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 31

unacceptable that when Romeo utters ‘Juliet is the sun’ he could be perfectly correctly interpreted to mean that Juliet is depressing and annoying. This would only mean that the interpreter was nudged into noticing something different than most of us would upon hearing the utterance.⁵⁶ However, I think the criticism misses the point that both Davidson and the contemporary theorists, but especially the latter, stress: that the metaphor *works its ways in virtue of the meaning of the words used and what they conventionally designate*. And according to the contemporary theory explicitly, it is the relevant concept, in this case of the sun, which is grounded in and constantly tested by our experience of interacting with the world. This does of course allow for such a misinterpretation as in the above case of an interpreter with a different concept of the sun; although they would only have formed a concept with such different connotations, if they had a radically different experience of the sun than we do in our culture (‘culture’ here used very loosely). Or ‘sun’ may also mean something completely different, in the interpreter’s language, but then this would be a matter of translation.

This idea of experiential concepts can also explain what Davidson means when he regardless of this denial of propositional content that the speaker can mean and the interpreter must grasp if he is to get it, he writes that “we chose to *get the idea across* a different way” when we expressed ourselves with a metaphor rather than, say, a simile.⁵⁷ This formulation suggests that there is something we want to get across, communicate. And of course there is; communication is the point of language and we intend to be understood in a certain way when uttering words. It is the conventional, normal meaning of the words used that does the nudging, the bringing to mind, and if this is grounded in our experiential concepts surely there is some idea that can be communicated. ‘Idea’ here is then understood as not some set of propositions, but the *understanding* of the relevant dimensions of one thing in the concept of another – a mapping of an image, or a concept.

In summary, there are several things that speak for the fact that images, the rather vague “visions, thoughts, and feelings inspired by metaphor” in Davidson, play the same role as the image and concept mappings of the contemporary theory. Both theories agree that the locus of metaphor is thought and not language, that what we recover from a metaphorical expression is not propositional, that the conventional meanings of the words actually used are crucial for the effect of the metaphor, and that metaphor allows us to see one thing in terms of another. Further, the contemporary theory of metaphorical mappings adds explanatory value without being incompatible with Davidson’s view on the insights metaphor prompts.

⁵⁶ Lycan 2008 p. 178

⁵⁷ Davidson 1978 p. 39, my italics

5. Davidson and the Experientialist Account of Truth

The experientialist account of truth as presented by the contemporary theorists claims that a truth is always truth relative to some conceptual system. We have above looked at the outlines of the theory. We have also seen that there is significant evidence in favour of the fact that what we first called images in Davidson's article could be further explained as being what the contemporary theory talks of as structured mappings. Let us for the sake of argument say that they are indeed compatible – can the experientialist account of truth tell us anything about how we can understand Davidson when he writes that the non-propositional, insightful images prompted by metaphorical expressions can be true?⁵⁸ And if so, can it do this without violating Davidson's view on truth and meaning? This chapter will address this question.

The main points of the experientialist account of truth as reviewed in this paper, can be said to be as follows: The relevant properties in metaphor are interactional rather than inherent, metaphorical conceptualizations are always partial, our concepts are grounded in experience, and understanding plays a central part in our concepts of truth and meaning.

Metaphorical expressions make us attend to some, often novel, likeness between two domains. But LOVE-IS-A-COLLABORATIVE-WORK-OF-ART is not true because love and collaborative artworks share some inherent properties – it can be true because our experience of what creating collaborative works of art can be like, can successfully be mapped onto our concept of love so that we understand the one as the other – they share some interactional properties.⁵⁹ And, recalling (E1) from chapter 3.1; that a theory of truth is a theory of understanding a statement as true or false *in a certain situation*. It was argued that Davidson would not reject that: to know the meaning of a statement is to know under what circumstances it would be true, according to his theory of truth and meaning.⁶⁰ We are not concerned here with statements, obviously, but with the images or mappings. Still, it doesn't seem altogether alien that they could work the same way. When I hear someone say that love is a collaborative work of art, a mental image is prompted and the experiential gestalt I have of collaborative artworks are evoked so that I understand what love is like when 'love is a collaborative work of art'. Understanding that amounts to understanding under what circumstances this mapping would be true, namely when the dimensions of the source domain fit relevant dimensions of the target domain and this matches the experience. It can happen, naturally, that this doesn't fit my personal experience of love relationships – but given that I have a concept grounded in

⁵⁸ 'Images' and 'mappings' will in the following be used interchangeably, given the assumption made for the sake of argument that they can indeed be indentified with each other.

⁵⁹ Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 215

⁶⁰ Davidson 1967 p. 160f.

experience of ‘collaborative work of art’ it can enhance my understanding of what love is like and what (interactional) properties it has when it is a collaborative work of art (rather than, say, a power struggle between two people). I know then, what experience of a certain state of affairs would make this mapping true.

Imagine two people each accepting one of two different conceptualizations of love, say LOVE-IS-A-POWER-STRUGGLE and LOVE-IS-A-COLLABORATIVE-WORK-OF-ART, respectively. They will infer different, perhaps not compatible, statements from their respective mappings, and the mappings can be true images matching each person’s experience. The one person X then uses some metaphorical expression, inspiring the mapping LOVE-IS-A-POWER-STRUGGLE in the other person Y’s mind. Y, conceptualizing love as a collaborative work of art, can still see love as a power struggle, and understand it in the sense that she knows under what circumstances this would be a more appropriate metaphor to use.

So I know the ‘meaning’ (if we might use this word here too although it clearly isn’t linguistic meaning in the same sense as when talking about the meaning of a proposition) of a mapping when I know under what circumstances it would be true, that is, what my experience would be like if I found that the mapping fitted my experience. This doesn’t explicitly contradict anything in Davidson’s account; rather it is analogous to his account of linguistic meaning.

Metaphorical mapping is always partial, as has been argued. The above-mentioned conceptualizations of love evoke different experiential gestalts, highlight and hide different dimensions of the concept of love – perhaps of the same actual state of affairs (the same love relationship, for example). In this sense, the mappings are non-intertranslatable – the one cannot be swapped for the other, they don’t give the same understanding of the situation. But laying bare this fact: that they are two different understandings, two different experiences of or points of view on the same situation, communication is of course possible across them. Understanding overall is perhaps enhanced – having two (or as we often do, more) different metaphors for the same concept is normally not confusing, it is enlightening. It gives us *more* knowledge of a situation, nuanced knowledge. In this sense, both mappings can be simultaneously true – true to some experience, and to know what an image inspired by metaphor means is to know what kind of experience it fits.

There is a heavy emphasis on experience and understanding all through Lakoff and Johnson’s text on the experiential truth account. Davidson correctly notes that talk of “experience rather than (...) just the facts, expresses a view about the source or nature of evidence, but it does not add a new thing to the universe against which to test conceptual schemes”⁶¹ – that is, the

⁶¹ Davidson 1974 p. 204

terminology of experience rather than the objective reality as truth-making, is an epistemological position on what relation we stand in to the world when it comes to knowing things about it.

Obviously, this view is dominant in the experientialist take on truth. One of the principal reasons for this is to be found in a combination of two claims that the contemporary theory of metaphor makes: That metaphorical understanding is as above noted always partial in nature, and that metaphorical understanding – that of one thing in terms of another – is prevalent all through our everyday language.

These two claims taken together raise a concern about how we use the concept of truth.⁶² As was mentioned in the introducing chapter 1.2, the concept of truth is very important to us – we depend upon it when we act, assume, reason, plan and understand other people. Davidson is very much aware of how important the notion of truth is. His well-known theory of radical interpretation is founded on exactly this – the only chance we have to ever understand other people and their language, whether it is our own natural language or one completely alien to us, is a principle of charity where we “[assign] to sentences of a speaker conditions of truth that actually obtain (in our opinion) just when the speaker holds those sentences true”, that is, we need to assume that other speakers in general speak the sentences they hold true, and that they hold true sentences that actually are true as far as we can tell.⁶³ Charity is not an option but a necessity if we wish to communicate through language.

In chapter 2.3, on Davidson, it was noted that most philosophers, as well as people in general, view truth as something that represent how reality really is, and also that something is either true or false, not both. A common assumption that is taken to follow from this, is that truth is something final and, more importantly, objective. Talk of true from one point of view but not from another is, at least in traditional western philosophy, considered suspect and non-scientific. What motivates the experiential account of truth is that if most of what we understand we understand through metaphors, and metaphorical understanding is partial and represents *some* experience – most of what we say is true is true only of some experience. There are dimensions of the understanding of the domain in question that are not covered by the specific mapping we understand it through, and the interactional properties that we assign to the domains are dependent on some experience of it.

Perhaps it is fine to make these assumptions of completeness and impartiality when it comes to simpler states of affairs we understand directly and not through some metaphor – that is, not through some other experiential gestalt – say, the colour of grass or snow, or tables and chairs perhaps. But, if the contemporary theory of metaphor is to be believed, this amounts to a very

⁶² Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 184

⁶³ Davidson 1974 p. 207

small part of our language and understanding. We normally and intuitively think of absolute truth as something that is applicable to a wide range of states of affairs. There is a danger in this, they claim. To be able to pick a metaphor fitting one's own experience and enforcing it so as to give it the grade of objective truth, independent of individual experience, is an instrument of power.⁶⁴

That we use the concept of truth, thinking it objective and impartial, where it is not appropriate to be thought of as such, seems to be the complaint that motivates the experientialist account. Therefore, we should say that truth is something relative. And Lakoff and Johnson do talk of truth being relative to conceptual systems, as has been reported. The idea of truth relative to a conceptual system can be elaborated on to result in more as well as less radical conceptual relativism. Davidson argues plausibly in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974) for the fact that we cannot intelligibly make sense of the idea of altogether different and non-intertranslatable conceptual schemes, and that we cannot intelligibly distinguish partial difference in conceptual schemes from the less exotic idea of difference in opinion (more or less radical). He also points out that even if those who are convinced that there is only one conceptual scheme are rebutted by his argument, since that assumption implies that there could be more than one – an idea we cannot at all make sense of.⁶⁵ Davidson's main complaint is that the idea of different conceptual schemes by necessity assumes a dualism between scheme and content, but since concepts are necessary for understanding and thinking we can never acquire a position outside of them to judge that another speaker's concept is a different one.⁶⁶

Formulations occur occasionally in the text of Lakoff and Johnson that could be interpreted as assuming conceptual relativism of the kind Davidson argues against.⁶⁷ It is likely that they do in fact claim this, but in the following I want to argue that this is a case of drawing conclusions which are too radical from some founding assumptions that are both sound and compatible with the view of Davidson.

When they do write that truth is always relative to a conceptual system, this needs to mean nothing more than that

- (A) Thinking and understanding requires concepts⁶⁸
- (B) Distributing truth-value to a mapping (or a proposition, of course) requires an understanding of both mapping and the situation it describes.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 157

⁶⁵ Davidson 1974 p. 196

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 202 and p. 205

⁶⁷ See for example Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 181

⁶⁸ Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 180

⁶⁹ Ibid.

(A), in turn, need claim nothing more than that basic categorisation and conceptualisation is a part of human cognition and required for having coherent thoughts about the world around us.

There is an important point to be made about the distinction between experience and evidence, and that is that the experientialist account does *not* assume a dualism between scheme and content, and in respect it is in line with Davidson. Neither of the theorists, then, would claim that it makes sense to talk of some objective reality independent of our experience of it.

Obviously, the concepts we need for comprehending the world around us are not random, but grounded in what is there; they arise, as has already been noted, from our constant interaction with the world and each other.⁷⁰ Lakoff and Johnson write explicitly that it is a case of mutual influence: “[t]he experiential myth takes the perspective of man as part of his environment, not as separate from it. It focuses on constant interaction with the physical environment and with other people. It views this interaction with the environment as involving mutual change. You cannot function within the environment without changing it or being changed by it.”⁷¹

This is, as well as the inoffensive (A) and (B), not inconsistent with Davidson, at least not according to my interpretation. It is less than what Lakoff and Johnson claim in their text, but it is compatible with the sound and stronger parts of their argument. That a lot of our understanding is through metaphorical and thus partial concepts is probably a correct empirical observation too. But to claim that there is a difference in conceptual scheme and thus ‘different truths’ when it comes to metaphor, is then really only to claim that the different metaphors can simultaneously be *true of different experiences* of the same concept or state of affairs. And this is, I believe, reducible to a garden variety of difference in opinion. Davidson indeed points out that “no general principle, or appeal to evidence, can force us to decide that the difference lies in our beliefs rather than in our concepts”.⁷² The bigger the difference in opinion, the bigger the temptation to call it a case of different conceptual scheme perhaps, but there is no way to intelligibly distinguish between them.⁷³

Given this, the experiential project really is motivated, and justifiably so, by the idea that opinions are not objective truths and should not unquestionably be taken as such. Metaphors can be true, but true of experiences, and experiences can differ.

Mappings or images inspired by metaphor are insightful because they enhance our understanding, and they can do this because they can show us new and different points of view on a domain, meaning that they can prompt us into understanding concepts or states of affairs

⁷⁰ Lakoff & Johnson 1980 p. 180f.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 229f.

⁷² Davidson 1974 p. 207

⁷³ Ibid.

given a different experience than our own personal one. They are tools for understanding – tools for understanding and framing experience, different experiences, and this they can do truthfully. Saying a metaphorical image is true is to judge that the given understanding of the one thing as the other, fits some experience of the relevant concept or situation that we can picture, but it doesn't need to be our own. To say that a metaphor is false, on the other hand, supposedly is to claim that the understanding of the relevant one thing as the other is not a fair or fitting description of a possible experience of the concept or state of affairs that we can comprehend.

6. Truth and Metaphor – Summary and Conclusions

The following section will sum up what has been said in this paper, and it will end with some reflections on what conclusions might be drawn from it.

The task was to investigate in what sense we can say that a metaphor can be true, even though the words in the expression used on first intuition seem to make the sentence false. In chapter two, Davidson's theory of metaphor was considered. It was noted that his view that sentences used metaphorically are patently false followed from his account of meaning as truth-conditions. The words used have only their conventional meaning, and so do the sentences they form – therefore they have their conventional truth-conditions too. Davidson does however allow that the mental image the interpretation of a metaphor consists in can be true or false. The contemporary theory of metaphor was introduced in chapter three, along with its experiential account of truth. While sharing with Davidson the idea that the mental image caused by a metaphor results from the conventional meaning of the words, and that the interesting part is really inside our heads rather than in the expressions taken by themselves, they more clearly state what this image is like: a structured mapping of one domain onto another, based on experiential gestalts.

Chapter four contained a discussion of the possibility of letting the davidsonian and the contemporary account of metaphor complement each other in such a way as for the idea of conceptual, structured mapping to explain further the fuzzier notion in Davidson of mental images evoked by metaphors as true or false; and offered a few arguments in favour of a possible fusion of the two notions were offered.

Finally, chapter five was devoted to exploring if it is possible to apply the experientialist account of truth when trying to explain in what sense and how Davidson's mental images evoked by metaphor can be said to be true or false. It was argued that the experiential account of truth as relative to concepts, since experience and cognition are always mediated through concepts, is motivated by the concern that since what we understand through metaphors is a partial understanding it should not be taken as objective truth. It was argued that this concern might have led Lakoff and Johnson to draw more radical conclusions about the concept of truth as a relative thing than is actually necessary. It was suggested that on a less strong interpretation that does not go against Davidson, the experiential account could be used to explain how insights from metaphors can be true. Two metaphorical mappings, even partially incoherent ones, of the same state of affairs or concept can simultaneously be true because they are true of the partial understanding or experience that it frames. This was found not to be incoherent with or contradictory to Davidson's account, which involves an awareness of how important the notion

of truth is for our communicating and functioning in the world, and of how experience is always necessarily involved in cognition, that it doesn't make sense to assume something neutral beyond experience.

What we take with us from the discussions in this paper is that metaphors can be true of experiences. They are tools for understanding – but partial understanding, and we need to be aware that much of our understanding is in fact just this: metaphorical and partial, in the sense that it highlights, downplays and hides different dimensions, and that the properties we understand as salient are interactional and dependent on, indeed created by, our experience of them. Metaphor does not threaten our concept of truth as something stable that holds whether we like it or not, but urges us to remember that many of our 'truths' are not like that, but rather of the different character described above.

The reluctance towards granting metaphors truth is likely to be just this – awareness that they *are* partial mappings, not some objective truth we can understand independently. Metaphor has then been thought to be the enemy of values like objectivity, rationality, reason and impartiality, and thus has no place in serious scientific inquiry. In upholding this fear of metaphor, we (philosophers more than others, perhaps) have missed out on the fact that what we like to think of as our best and most reliable fields of science is far from free from metaphorical thinking. The more microscopically tiny, overwhelmingly fast, far or large, or abstract the scientific discoveries and theories get, the more we depend on metaphorical thinking to even comprehend what is being dealt with. Hypotheses can easily be seen to be constructed this way – viewing and trying to explain one phenomenon as another we already have some experience of. Also, it is not a big leap to see the similarities between metaphors and models used in science, where relevant properties for our experience are highlighted, others left out of the picture and the structure and correspondence between parts and wholes preserved etcetera.

Metaphors, then, are understanding of things in terms of other things, and they are everywhere. As important as it is to be able to grant metaphorical insights some kind of truth, it is equally important to be aware of what kind of truths they are – truths of some experience – because they are our most common type of truth.

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