metaphors and meaninglessness

There are certain interesting connections between the use of metaphor and the use of the concept of meaninglessness. I shall try to bring out some of these connections by examining certain philosophic views of the nature of metaphor and by showing how these views lead to skepticism concerning either the employment of metaphor or the use of the concept of meaninglessness.\(^1\)

1 Two views of metaphor are especially relevant here. According to the first and older view, all metaphors are meaningless. According to the second and more sophisticated view, there is nothing wrong with the use of metaphor, but there is something wrong with the use of the concept of meaninglessness because it forces us to say that metaphors are meaningless.

The first view of metaphor may be accepted for various reasons. One reason, for example, for saying that metaphors are meaningless is based on the definition of the concept of metaphor in terms of the concept of a category mistake. Colin Turbayne, for instance, defines the notion of

\(^1\) Some writers see the use of metaphor as presenting a major obstacle to the use of the concept of meaninglessness. For example, R. Routley, although he believes the obstacle can be circumvented, writes: "One problem which threatens to destroy a significance theory before it begins is the problem of metaphor and transference of sense." See "On a Significance Theory," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, XLIV (1966), p. 178.
metaphor in this way in his interesting book, *The Myth of Metaphor*. He writes:

Gilbert Ryle offers a still better definition of metaphor: 'It represents the facts . . . *as if* they belonged to one logical type or categories, when they actually belong to another.' This greatly illuminates the subject of metaphor because it draws our attention to those two features that I have been stressing, namely sort-crossing or the fusion of different sorts, and the pretense or *as if* feature. I should again point out, however, that although this definition is about the best definition of metaphor known to me, it is not Ryle's definition of metaphor at all. It is, indeed, his alternative definition of category-mistake or categorial confusion.²

It would seem, given the above definition of "metaphor," that every metaphor is an instance of categorial confusion. Turbayne, however, subsequently balks at this implication and denies that all metaphors are mistakes. He is unclear, however, about what gives him the right to deny this implication once he has accepted the above definition. At one point, he seems to think that he is justified because it need not be a mistake to cross types. Thus he writes: "But it seems altogether unlikely that Ryle regards metaphors as mistakes, for such 'category mistakes' may have great value. It is not necessarily a mistake to cross sorts."³ He then goes on to point out that it is only a mistake when one crosses sorts or types "without awareness,"—that is, when one takes a metaphor literally.⁴ Still later, however, he writes in a way that rules out anyone's ever taking a metaphor literally:

But since metaphor is not a metaphor *per se* but only for someone, from one point of view it is better to say that sometimes the metaphor is not noticed; it is hidden. That is, if X is aware of the metaphor while Y is not, X says that Y is being taken in by the metaphor, or being used by it, or taking it literally. But for Y it is not a case of taking the metaphor literally at all, because for him there is no metaphor. He is speaking literally or taking it literally.⁵

According to Turbayne's account, then, all metaphors, by definition, are category mistakes; but not all category mistakes, or type crossings, are

⁴ *Ibid*.
mistakes. Category mistakes are only mistakes when taken literally. Thus, although all metaphors are category mistakes, only metaphors which are taken literally are mistakes. Since, however, metaphors are not metaphors per se, but only from a given point of view, no metaphor can possibly be taken literally: if it is taken literally, it is not a metaphor.

I think that this part of Turbayne's account is confused. Rather than try to straighten out his analysis, I shall simply expose what I believe to be the initial mistake which causes the confusion: the attempt to define "metaphor" in terms of "category mistake." However, I should first mention another reason for viewing metaphors as meaningless—one discussed by Elizabeth Hungerland in her Poetic Discourse. She writes:

For a time, linguistic meaning resided exclusively with cognition. How, some philosophers asked, could a sentence be meaningful unless it were verifiable? 'Life is a tale told by an idiot' is hardly the kind of sentence that reports facts, describes things—it cannot be either true or false; it is accordingly meaningless. (The philosophers in question did not, of course, deny that poetry has human and rhetorical significance, but they failed to find meaning 'in the strict linguistic sense' in much of poetic discourse.)

Mrs. Hungerland is referring, of course, to the logical positivists. If they accepted this view of metaphor, it was because they also accepted a verificationist view of meaning; however, it is not clear that the positivists did hold this view. Mrs. Hungerland does not name a particular positivist. Indeed, it is difficult to find an explicit statement by any leading positivist that all metaphors are meaningless, although such a view is perhaps suggested by Carnap when he writes:

The aim of a lyrical poem in which occur the words 'sunshine' and 'clouds,' is not to inform us of certain meteorological facts, but to express certain feelings of the poet and to excite similar feelings in us. A lyrical poem has no assertional sense, no theoretical sense, it does not contain knowledge.

Since "no theoretical sense," for Carnap, is equivalent to "cognitively meaningless," it would seem to follow that lyrical poetry is meaningless, or

---

cognitively meaningless. It is not clear whether Carnap wants to describe all poetry in this way, and, if so, whether he wishes to describe as meaningless all uses of metaphor, or only uses of metaphor within poetry.\(^8\)

Perhaps the most explicit statement of this "positivist" view of poetry, assuming that it was the view of the positivists, is to be found in the writings not of a philosopher but of the poet Archibald MacLeish, who concludes his poem "Ars Poetica" with the lines:

A poem should be equal to:
Not true
For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf
For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—
A poem should not mean
But be

Even if the positivists did hold the view that all metaphors are meaningless, however, I doubt that many philosophers writing today, even among contemporary positivists, would accept such a view. In fact, there is a contrary view which, I think, would find more favor today among many philosophers. According to this contrary view, poetic uses of language are quite respectable; what is not respectable is the use of the concept of meaninglessness. Suppose, for example, we say that "He had a green thought" is nonsensical. Now suppose we find this sentence, or one very much like it, appearing in a poetic context. We should not say that the poet was speaking nonsense; therefore, we should not say that "He had a green thought" is nonsensical in the first place. Thus Paul Ziff writes:

I shall not discuss whether or not 'He had a green thought' is nonsensical. However, I can see not the slightest reason to suppose that it is nonsensical. When Andrew Marvell wrote 'Annihilating all that's made to a green thought in a green shade' he was not making a mistake, neither did he write anything nonsensical.\(^9\)

\(^8\) He does go on to say that "all arts have this non-theoretical character," which does suggest that he is talking about all poetry and not just lyrical poetry.

METAPHORS AND MEANINGLESSNESS

I shall now try to show that both of the views outlined above are mistaken and that they are mistaken for the same reason.

Take, first, the view that all metaphors are meaningless. We might be tempted to say this either because we accept a verificationist criterion of meaninglessness or because we accept a category or type criterion. Regardless of which criterion we are employing, however, and irrespective of whether such a criterion is reliable, we should resist this temptation. Even if it is true that a meaningless statement would be made if a sentence were being used literally—or if one or more of the words within the sentence were being used literally—it fails to follow that the statement made when the sentence is being used metaphorically is also meaningless. The statements made are not the same: using a group of words literally and then metaphorically will result in two different statements. \( ^{10} \) Suppose, for example, I assert that "There will be a time when logics die." Moreover, I explain that by "logics" I mean "formal systems" and that the rest of my words are also to be interpreted literally. In that case, we might say that my statement is meaningless and that, perhaps, a category mistake has been committed. A formal system is not the kind of thing one could describe as "dying," at least not in a literal sense. Or, to take a second example, I might be accused of uttering nonsense if I speak of "thoughts that smell in the rain"—a charge that might be justified, if I am speaking literally.

Suppose, instead, that these words are not to be taken literally. Dylan Thomas, for example, speaks in one of his poems of "thoughts that smell in the rain"; he also writes of a time "when logics die." Thomas, presumably, is speaking metaphorically. In using the term "logics," for example, he does not mean "formal systems": he is not asserting that formal systems die. Thomas is not making the same statements, therefore, that I made earlier; and, hence, we need not say that his statements are meaningless merely because mine were.

Because a category mistake is a particular statement, not a sentence, it is wrong to define "metaphor" in terms of "category mistake." Thus, even if using a given sentence literally would produce a category mistake, using the same sentence metaphorically would not. The most we can say, it

\( ^{10} \) I shall speak throughout of a sentence being used metaphorically, even though it may be more apt to speak only of a word, or a group of words, within the sentence as being so used.
seems, is that metaphors would be category mistakes, or at least meaningless, if they were read literally. But we cannot even say that. Consider the following lines from W. H. Auden’s poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” written in January of 1939:

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait  
Each sequestered in its hate.

In the first two lines, Auden is referring not to yelping canines but to quarreling nations: he is not claiming that, on some night in January of 1939, all of the canines in Europe were yelping and growling. Instead, he is saying, roughly, that in the ominous days which preceded the outbreak of World War II, the nations of Europe were quarreling like barking dogs. Suppose, however, we interpret Auden literally. Suppose we understand him as saying that, on some given night in January of 1939, all the canines in Europe were barking. His assertion might then be false, for perhaps there was no such night in January of 1939. Although false, however, such an assertion would not be nonsensical. It is not even true, then, that all metaphors are nonsensical if read literally. Nevertheless, the important point is that metaphors are not meant to be read literally. Even if it were true that all metaphors are meaningless if interpreted literally, it would still not follow that all metaphors are meaningless. If a speaker is using words metaphorically, he is not speaking literally. Hence, he is not making the meaningless statement he would be making if he were speaking literally. It is wrong, then, to say that all metaphors are meaningless.

It is also wrong to conclude that use of the concept of meaninglessness is suspect merely because the use of metaphors is not. Suppose, for example, that it is meaningless to assert literally that “He had a green thought.” That does not imply that if a poet uses these same words metaphorically, he, too, is uttering nonsense or making a mistake of some kind. The poet, if he is making an assertion at all, is not making the same assertion made when these words are used literally. He may be using the same sentence, but he is not making the same statement.

Both of the above views, then, are incorrect because they fail to
distinguish between the metaphor and the sentence used in stating the metaphor. The sentence "He had a green thought" may be used literally to make a meaningless statement; but it may also be used metaphorically to make a different statement, which is not meaningless. We need not conclude, therefore, that all metaphors are meaningless; but neither must we conclude, merely because at least some metaphors are not meaningless, that there is something illegitimate or suspicious about the use of the concept of meaninglessness.

I have said that in using a sentence metaphorically we are not making the same statement which would be made if the sentence were used literally. We are making a different statement. What is this "different" statement? Is it meaningful? If it is not, then we shall still be forced to conclude that all metaphors are meaningless, even after distinguishing the metaphor and the sentence used in stating the metaphor.

According to one very widely held view of metaphor, this "different" statement is simply a simile—a statement making a literal comparison between two terms. This view, which is often referred to as the "comparison view" of metaphor, is described by a leading literary critic, Northrop Frye, in his work *The Anatomy of Criticism*. He writes:

Descriptively, then, all metaphors are similes. When we are writing ordinary discursive prose and use a metaphor, we are not asserting that A is B: we are 'really' saying that A is in some respects comparable with B; and similarly when we are extracting the descriptive or paraphrasable meaning of a poem. 'The hero was a lion,' then, on the descriptive level, is a simile with the word 'like' omitted for greater vividness, and to show more clearly that the analogy is only a hypothetical one.\(^{11}\)

If this view is correct, there is no problem about the meaningfulness of the statement that is "really" made when we speak metaphorically. The statement that is "really" made is not the nonsensical statement which (in many cases) would be made if the sentence were being used literally; instead, it is

a straightforward statement making a comparison between two terms. There is no reason why this comparison statement would have to be meaningless. There is no reason, for example, to conclude that a statement such as "Richard is like a lion" is meaningless. If we accept this comparison analysis, therefore, we can avoid the conclusion that all metaphors are meaningless.

Recently, however, the comparison analysis of metaphor has been challenged as being inadequate. Max Black, for example, has argued, in a recent and highly influential article, that the comparison analysis has to be supplemented, at least for a certain class of cases, by what he terms an "interaction" analysis. According to the interaction view of metaphor, a metaphor "works" by having the predicate-term interact with the subject-term, thus causing a change in meaning of the subject-term. To use Black's example, saying that "Man is a wolf" changes the meaning of the term "man," for after using the metaphor, man seems more wolf-like—more predatory, voracious, treacherous, etc. It is because of this shift in meaning, moreover, that the comparison view is said to be inadequate. If we translate the wolf-metaphor as "Man is like a wolf (in some respects)," we are using the term "man" here in its old sense, and "man" does not now have this sense.

Recently, Black's analysis has been employed by certain philosophers of science in their discussion of scientific theories. Mary Hesse, who claims that scientific theories should be viewed as metaphors, argues that Black's analysis is incompatible with assumptions generally made in the "deductive account" of scientific explanation. In the deductive account, Miss Hesse points out, terms appearing in scientific laws are assumed to remain invariant in meaning to all changes of explanatory theory. For example, the term "mass" would have the same meaning in different theories. But if explanatory theory functions as a metaphor, and if in metaphorical description the meanings of terms do not remain invariant, the deductive account, Miss Hesse argues, has to be modified. She writes:

Men are seen to be more like wolves after the wolf-metaphor is used, and wolves seem more human. Nature becomes more like a machine in the

mechanical philosophy, and actual, concrete machines themselves are seen as if stripped down to their essential qualities of mass in motion.

This point is the kernel of the interaction view, and is Black's major contribution to the analysis of metaphor. It is incompatible with the comparison view, which assumes that the literal descriptions of both systems are and remain independent of the use of the metaphor, and the metaphor is reducible to them. The consequences of the interaction view for theoretical models are also incompatible with assumptions generally made in the deductive account of explanation, namely that descriptions and descriptive laws in the domain of the explanandum remain empirically acceptable and invariant in meaning to all changes of explanatory theory.13

I shall now examine what Miss Hesse says here, without attempting to cover all of the interesting points she raises about the connection between theories and metaphors. I shall also disregard her assertion that the interaction analysis is incompatible with the comparison analysis. Black does not make such a claim; he claims only that the interaction analysis is needed as a supplement to cover a certain class of cases for which the comparison analysis seems inadequate. In some cases, at least, the comparison analysis would be sufficient. To bring Miss Hesse's view in line with Black's, therefore, I shall assume that she is making only the weaker claim that an interaction analysis is required not to rival but to supplement the comparison analysis.

The reason the comparison analysis is inadequate, according to Black and Hesse, is that use of a metaphor results in a change in meaning of the subject-terms (and perhaps of the predicate-term as well). It is this change in meaning that allegedly prevents our paraphrasing metaphors in the manner suggested by the comparison analysis. I should now like to suggest, however, that we have a right to be skeptical about this "change in meaning" claim.

To use an example which both Black and Hesse use—one for which the interaction analysis is supposedly required—need a change in meaning occur in the term "man" merely because the wolf-metaphor has been used? I doubt that this is so. Suppose, for example, that I have just learned of my

CONCEPT OF MEANINGLESSNESS

dismissal from my university post and that I suspect my colleagues of having voted for my dismissal only because they seek to gain from my departure. Disgruntled and disenchanted, I might utter to myself, "Man is a wolf." Suppose, however, that no one—neither I nor anyone else—ever utters these words again. It seems implausible that the meaning of "man" would have changed simply because a single speaker used the wolf-metaphor on one occasion. If no one heard me utter the words "Man is a wolf," then how will my single use of this metaphor affect the usage of other speakers? If my use of the metaphor has no effect on how other speakers use the term "man," then how will the meaning of the term "man," as this term is used by other speakers, be altered? The most that would result would be that the meaning of "man" as it is used in the ideoloc of a single speaker would change. But now I want to argue that even this is implausible. Suppose I later learn that the news of my dismissal had been a mistake, and suppose that I completely forget my feeling of disenchantment with my colleagues. Might I not then view man in the same manner as before and use the term "man" in the very same ways as before? If such were the case, how would the meaning of the term "man" have changed even for me?

Suppose that others were to use the wolf-metaphor as well. This has, in fact, happened. Since Black's article was written (in 1954), and even prior to that time, the wolf-metaphor has been used, if only as an illustration, on numerous occasions. Has this resulted in a change of meaning of the term "man"? I think this, too, is implausible. It is not altogether clear what it means to say that a term has "changed its meaning"; hence, it is not altogether clear what it means to deny such an assertion. I do think, however, that there are some things we can say about "change in meaning." For example, I think it can be said that a term has not changed in meaning when used in making two separate statements, if a statement containing the term is inconsistent with a subsequent statement which contains the same term and is the apparent denial of the original statement. For example, if I say at time T₁, "Philosophy is dull," and at time T₂, "Philosophy is not

---

dull”—and if my statements are inconsistent—then the meaning of the term “philosophy” is the same in both statements. If the meaning of the term “philosophy” (or of the other terms) were not the same, the statements would not be inconsistent.

Let us apply this test to the case of “man.” Suppose that Max Black was the first person to use the wolf-metaphor and that he used it for the first time in 1954. Has the meaning of the term “man” changed since that time? I doubt that it has. If Black had said prior to 1954, “All men must die,” and if he, or any other employer of the wolf-metaphor, were now to say, “Not all men must die,” would not the second statement be inconsistent with the first? If so, would this not show that the meaning of the term “man” had not changed? Either Black or Miss Hesse might wish to claim, however, that these statements were not inconsistent, but only seemed to be. They would, then, have to provide some argument to support their claim. Until such an argument is provided, I think we are justified in being skeptical of the claim that the meaning of the term “man” has changed; therefore, we should in turn be skeptical of the thesis that using a metaphor changes the meaning of one or more of its component terms. This is not to say, however, that use of a metaphor never results in a change in meaning. I do think that repeated and constant use of a metaphor sometimes does cause a change in meaning, as when a live metaphor becomes a dead metaphor. Of the two illustrations used by Miss Hesse, a more plausible argument might be made for saying that the second is a dead metaphor and that the term “nature” has changed in meaning as a result of the repeated use of the “machine” metaphor. Now, I want to argue that even when a change of meaning does occur, the change will not affect our ability to paraphrase the metaphor in the manner suggested by the comparison analysis.

Let us assume that the term “nature” has changed in meaning and that the change has occurred because of extensive use of the “machine” metaphor. Suppose, then, that “nature” means something different at times $T_1$ and $T_2$—where $T_1$ is a time during Newton’s lifetime, and $T_2$ is a time after 1800. If someone were to say at time $T_1$ that “Nature is a machine,” he would not have been speaking both literally and truly. At time $T_1$ it was not literally true to say that “Nature is a machine.” The speaker, of course,
might have been speaking metaphorically, depending, in part, on his intentions. In that case, we could have interpreted the speaker, as the comparison analysis suggests, as saying that nature is like a machine (in certain respects).

Suppose, however, that after constant use of this metaphor the term “nature” developed a new sense. Using “nature” in this new sense, then, it would be literally true to say, “Nature is a machine.” Hence, if someone were to use this sentence at time $T_2$, a time after which “nature” had developed this second sense, he could be speaking literally and yet be making a true statement. The comparison analysis would then be inappropriate, for the speaker would not be saying that “nature is like a machine”; he would be saying, literally and truly, that “Nature is a machine.” If the comparison analysis is inappropriate here, that does not mean that some other analysis, such as the interaction analysis, is needed. No metaphoric analysis is needed, simply because the speaker at time $T_2$ would not be speaking metaphorically at all. He would be speaking both literally and truly. Even where use of a metaphor does result in a change in meaning, therefore, no additional analysis is needed to supplement the comparison analysis. Thus, it would have been necessary at time $T_1$ to interpret “Nature is a machine” metaphorically; but at time $T_2$, no such need would have been present. This should not seem particularly puzzling, however, once we have distinguished sentences from statements. Although the same sentence would be used at both times, the statements made by the literal use of the sentence would be different at each of the two times. It is not surprising, then, that the statement made at $T_1$ by the literal use of “Nature is a machine” would be nonsensical or obviously false, while the statement made at $T_2$ by the literal use of this same sentence would be true: the two statements would be different.

What allows the speaker to use the same sentence to make a different statement at different times is that one of the terms in the sentence has developed a new sense in the interim between the two uses; i.e., enough speakers have used the term in this novel way on enough occasions to warrant our saying that the term now has two literal senses, whereas before it had only one. The term “fork,” for example, now has a second literal sense which it lacked at an earlier time. At one time, “fork” meant only
“eating utensil.” Through constant use of the metaphor “There is a fork in the road,” however, the term developed a second sense, namely “branch” or “break.” As a result, we can now make literal use of the sentence “There is a fork in the road” and make a different statement from that which would have been made had this same sentence been used literally before the development of the second sense. This phenomenon of the same sentence being used to make two different statements can occur in cases where metaphor is not involved at all—where, for example, someone merely stipulates that he will use a term in a new technical sense. I conclude, therefore, that the change in meaning sometimes brought about by the extensive use of a metaphor—a change in which a live metaphor becomes a dead metaphor—presents no special problem concerning the analysis of metaphor; that is, no problem which is either peculiar to the use of metaphor, or which cannot be handled by the comparison analysis of metaphor. I do not think, therefore, that the “special” analysis—the interaction analysis suggested by Max Black and Mary Hesse—is either a successful rival of, or a useful supplement to, the comparison analysis described earlier.

Perhaps the truth of Black’s and Hesse’s assertions comes to this: in many cases, especially in the case of a strikingly good metaphor, no paraphrase will be entirely acceptable. No matter what we might suggest as a paraphrase, we are inclined to say that something is left out, that the metaphor does not mean exactly that. T. E. Hulme, for example, asks of the line from Keats’ “Isabella,” “And she forgot the blue above the trees”:

Why did he put ‘blue above the trees’ and not ‘sky’? ‘Sky’ is just as attractive an expression. . . . Simply for this reason, that he instinctively felt that the word ‘sky’ would not convey over the actual vividness and the actuality of the feelings he wanted to express.  

We could paraphrase Keats’ remark by substituting “sky” for “blue,” but the paraphrase would not be quite right: Keats did not mean exactly that. In such a case, where no exact paraphrase can be found, the comparison analysis will seem unacceptable, although not because, as suggested by

Black and Hesse, use of the metaphor changes the meaning of one or more of the key terms in the sentence. As I have already argued, the use of any metaphor may fail to cause a change in meaning; and if a change in meaning does occur, that will not in itself affect our ability to paraphrase the metaphor. Moreover, the difficulty of finding exact paraphrases does not arise only in cases of metaphor. In speaking literally, if a speaker uses his words skillfully and precisely, an exact paraphrase may not be available. No paraphrase of even some of the literal passages of Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," for example, will serve quite as well as the original. "Four-score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation" may mean roughly the same as "Eighty-seven years ago, our ancestors founded a new country in North America," but the second statement does not have exactly the same meaning as the first.

I would now like to suggest why exact paraphrases are very often not available. This reason has nothing to do with "change in meaning" and, in fact, has no essential connection with metaphors. The reason is simply that there are very few cases of synonyms, or synonymous phrases, being exactly equivalent in meaning. In the case of almost every pair of synonyms, there are some conceivable contexts in which one of the terms could not replace the other without altering the meaning of what was said. Take, for example, the terms "statement" and "assertion." The second of these terms is often used, and rightly so, as a synonym for the first. Thus, if I were to say, "Maxwell's statement about the ether later proved to be false," someone might correctly paraphrase this as, "Maxwell's assertion about the ether later proved to be false." It is easy to show, however, as Paul Ziff does, that "statement" and "assertion" are not exactly synonymous. One may be making a statement, for example, in saying, "I suppose things have gotten a bit out of hand," but one is not making an assertion. So, too, to say, "The President made a statement to the press," is not to say, "The President made an assertion to the press."

That there are few pairs of synonyms exactly equivalent in meaning often makes finding exact paraphrases difficult. If one group of words is substituted for another, we can often point to some difference in meaning

---

16 Ziff, Semantic Analysis, p. 120.
between the two groups, no matter how slight, by pointing to some possible context in which one of the terms in the new group will not mean the same as the corresponding term, or set of terms, in the former group. In some cases, the difference in meaning will be so slight as to be unnoticeable, but in many cases it will not. In the latter kind of case, a paraphrase may seem unacceptable. Such a case may be a case of metaphor. Often it is, but sometimes it is not.

To sum up: I agree, then, with those who charge that a comparison analysis fails, in many cases, to provide an exact paraphrase of metaphors. But I disagree with the additional claim, of Black and Hesse, that the failure occurs because use of the metaphor changes the meaning of (at least) one of the component terms. Such a change of meaning may come about, but often it does not; and even where it does come about, it will not hamper our attempts to paraphrase the metaphor exactly. What will hamper our attempts to find an exact paraphrase is the scarcity of pairs of synonyms, including both single words and phrases, which are exactly equivalent in meaning. This same scarcity will make it difficult to find exact paraphrases in some cases, although perhaps not as many, where metaphor is not involved at all. That we cannot find an exact paraphrase, or translation, of a statement, however, does not entail that such a statement cannot be understood. We probably cannot find an exact paraphrase of a statement such as “John Stuart Mill was very intelligent,” for there is no word, or set of words, exactly equivalent in meaning to the word “intelligent.” Yet, we would not thereby conclude that this statement is incomprehensible. To explain what is being said, it is not necessary to find an exact paraphrase or translation; giving a rough paraphrase, or explaining in some other way, is sufficient. To explain is not to translate, at least not necessarily.

We need not say, then, that all metaphors are meaningless. In using words metaphorically, a speaker is not making the same statement—a statement that might be meaningless—as he would be making if he were to use these same words literally. He is making some other statement, assuming that he is making a statement at all. This other statement, in turn, is not (or, at least, need not be) meaningless either. In most cases of metaphor, we can explain, to some extent, what statement is being made by pointing
to another statement which is *roughly* equivalent and whose meaningfulness is not problematic. We can, for example, explain to some extent what is being said when I say, "Man is a wolf." What I am saying, roughly, but only roughly, is that "Man is like a wolf (in certain respects)." There is not, or at least there should not be, any temptation to regard this latter statement as meaningless.

3

I have spoken of "change in meaning" as if it were an abrupt kind of event. This is misleading. The term "fork," for example, did not change in meaning at 3 A.M., Thursday, April 14, 1867—nor at any other precise time. The case of dead metaphors, in fact, nicely illustrates the *transitional* aspect of changes in meaning. An expression which becomes a dead metaphor passes through a transitional phase often lasting many years, during which it is difficult, if not impossible, to say whether the expression is literal or metaphorical. For example, the expression "fork in the road" was first used as a metaphor around 1839. It was subsequently used by enough speakers of English on enough occasions eventually to become a dead metaphor; that is, "fork" was subsequently used often enough to refer to a "branch or break in the road" for this sense of the term to be listed in the dictionary as a separate, literal sense. There was a period, however, between 1839 and the time the expression became a dead metaphor when it would have been very difficult and perhaps impossible to decide whether "fork in the road" was metaphorical.

There are also expressions which at present seem to be in a similar transitional state. For instance, is it a metaphorical or literal use of "blue" to say: "I am not a bit blue about the prospect of losing my wife?" The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists this sense of "blue" as figurative, whereas *Webster's New International* lists it as literal. However, it is probably neither definitely figurative nor definitely literal. In speaking of a change in meaning, then, we should not think of it as similar to a change in facial expression or a change in a woman's attitude; that is, we should not think of it as occurring abruptly. Insofar as I have spoken of "meaning change" in this way, then, I have been speaking misleadingly. But I think it also

17 *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "fork."
misleading to say, as some philosophers have said, that the fact that meaning change is often a matter of slow transition shows that there is no clear distinction between metaphorical and literal use. If this means simply that there are expressions which we logically cannot classify correctly as either “metaphorical” or “literal,” then I think it is true. I disagree, however, if what is being asserted is that there is no clear distinction between such expressions as: (1) “In very deed the hills were liars, and the multitude of the mountains” (Jean de St. Thomas), and (2) “John has gone downtown to buy a pair of shoes” (Jerry Fodor). There is a clear distinction here: the first is clearly metaphorical; the second is clearly not.

A simple and not very original metaphor may be of some help here. We might think of a distinction as a boundary-line drawn between two states. Or, to make the analogy more exact, think of the boundary not as a geometrical line having no width, but as an area one mile wide, bounded on each side by parallel lines. Some houses are located within the one mile area. Many other houses are located clearly on one or the other side of the border. So, too, there are expressions which are in the border area between the literal and metaphorical and expressions located clearly on one or the other side of the boundary.

One additional point. In referring to the expression “Nature is a machine,” I said that how a speaker used this expression might depend, in part, on his intentions. I shall now say something about this subject of “the speaker’s intentions,” without moving very far, however, into what is an intricate and involved subject.

As I have already argued, an author may use the same words literally or metaphorically, and, hence, make either of two statements—the first of which may be meaningless, while the second is not. To determine whether we are confronted with metaphor or nonsense, therefore, we must determine what is being said—what statement is actually being made. To determine this we may have to consider the author’s intentions. If I say in the abstract, for example, that “the hills were liars,” you may have to determine how I intend to use these words, before condemning me for speaking nonsensically, or pardoning me for speaking metaphorically. The same is true where other linguistic devices are employed, such as irony, metonymy, hyperbole, etc. You may, once again, have to ascertain the author’s intentions to decide what is being said. If this is necessary, but
CONCEPT OF MEANINGLESSNESS

cannot be done—perhaps because the author is dead and the text itself is silent—then we may be unable to determine what is being said, and, therefore, may be unable to determine if what is being said is meaningless.

Ascertaining intentions, however, is not always necessary. It is not necessary, for example, if the speaker clearly indicates how he is to be understood, perhaps by using some contextual device such as raising his voice or marking “poetry” above his words. Brutus, for example, clearly indicated how he was to be understood when he said, in an ironic tone of voice, “Caesar is an honorable man.” In using an ironic contour, he indicated that he was not lauding Caesar for being honorable, but denigrating him for being dishonest. In such a case, the author’s actual, and perhaps hidden, intentions do not alter what is being said. Brutus, for example, might have subsequently denied that he intended to defame Caesar; but, nevertheless, he did. So, too, if a man says in an everyday context, “John went downtown to buy a pair of shoes,” we need not consider the speaker’s intentions at all, once we know who “John” is. Apart from some extraordinary context, these words could be used to mean but one thing. In general, what a speaker means is what he intends to say; but what his words mean may not be what he means, and, hence, may not mean what he intends to say. We sometimes fail to say what we mean—we mean to say one thing but actually say another. It is what we actually say, however, and not (necessarily) what we intend to say, that is either meaningless or meaningful.

I shall now summarize what I have been saying in this chapter.

1. Some philosophers have charged that metaphors are category mistakes, or at least meaningless for some other reason. I tried to show that this view is mistaken, and in what way. In many cases, a meaningless statement would result if a sentence were being used literally. In the case of a metaphor, however, the sentence is not being used literally, and some statement other than the literal, meaningless statement is being made. There is no need to conclude, therefore, that all metaphors are meaningless. It might be meaningless, for example, to assert literally that “thoughts smell in the rain”; but if a poet, such as Dylan Thomas, uses these words,


124
then he may be speaking not literally but metaphorically. He may, therefore, be making a different statement from that which would be made if he were speaking literally. His statement, moreover, may be meaningful. In metaphorical usage, then, something other than the literal, meaningless statement is being made. But what is this other statement? Is it meaningful? If it is not, then metaphors, once again, will be said to be meaningless. In answering this question, I considered first the comparison view of metaphor, according to which the other statement being made is equivalent to another statement which makes a comparison of some kind. For example, "Man is a lion," when used metaphorically, means "Man is like a lion."

2. Max Black and others, such as Mary Hesse, have recently argued, however, that a supplementary analysis of metaphor is needed. According to this supplementary analysis, the predicate-term "interacts" with the subject-term in certain metaphors so as to cause a change in meaning of the latter (or of both). Saying that "Man is a wolf," for example, changes the meaning of "man"—man seems more wolf-like than before the use of the metaphor. For this reason, no literal paraphrase of the metaphor will do. In giving a literal paraphrase, we are using "man" in its former sense, and "man" does not now have this sense. Black's argument has been quite influential and is cited by a number of recent writers on metaphor. I have argued, however, that the argument is unsound.19 Using a metaphor, any metaphor whatsoever, may cause a change in meaning, but probably it will not. Moreover, if a change in meaning does come about, this will not in itself affect our ability to find a suitable paraphrase. Hence, the interaction analysis does not explain why the comparison analysis fails to fit complex metaphors.

3. There are many cases, it is true, in which no more than a rough paraphrase is to be found. For this reason, a comparison view of metaphor is too simplistic: not all metaphors admit of exact paraphrase. But neither do all literal statements. The reason, in both instances, has to do not with meaning change, but with the melancholy fact that few synonyms, if any, are exactly equivalent in meaning.

19 I have not objected, however, to any of the other interesting points which Black makes about metaphor, nor have I tried to present a rival account of how metaphors function.