

Pepper's Philosophical Approach to Metaphor: the Literal and the Metaphorical

Earl R. MacCormac

Davidson College

Pepper's concept of a root metaphor possesses profound implications for any theory that attempts to explain language, especially those theories that try to construct explanatory accounts of ambiguity and metaphor. We attempt to show how Pepper's notion of a root metaphor underlies the very explanatory theory offered for metaphor. Any explanatory theory of metaphor must as a theory necessarily be metaphorical in the sense of presupposing a root metaphor. But this discovery does not mean that all language is metaphorical; there can be literal language even though metalinguistic accounts of language including metaphor must be founded upon root metaphors.

Stephen Pepper's development of the notion of a "root metaphor" usually has been understood in the context of metaphysics. And this interpretation does capture Pepper's major thrust in *World Hypotheses* for he was primarily concerned to demonstrate the legitimacy of structural corroboration as a knowledge process that generated four overlapping, conflicting and yet insightful metaphysical views of the world. Pepper's concept of a root metaphor, however, extends far beyond his metaphysical motivation, for the root metaphor method possesses profound implications for any theory that attempts to explain language, especially those theories that try to construct explanatory accounts of ambiguity and metaphor. We shall attempt to show how Pepper's notion of a root metaphor underlies the very explanatory theory offered for metaphor. Any explanatory theory of metaphor must as a theory necessarily be metaphorical in the sense of presupposing a root metaphor. But this discovery does not mean that all language is metaphorical; there can be literal language even though metalinguistic accounts of language including metaphor must be founded upon root metaphors.

Our procedure will be: (1) to review briefly Pepper's development of the concept of a root metaphor; (2) to explore the paradoxical problem of trying to construct an explanatory account of metaphor that itself must be metaphorical in the sense of presupposing a metaphor; and (3) to develop a concept of what can be called literal.

Pepper called these metaphors that serve as fundamental presuppositions underlying a theory "root metaphors." We have changed the name, however, to "basic metaphors" to avoid the limited association to metaphysical theo-

ries that Pepper described (Pepper, 1970). A basic metaphor can serve as the hypothetical presupposition for a single theory, or a discipline, or a theology, and not only as the basis of a metaphysical theory. Since our basic metaphor is just an extension of Pepper's notion, let us return to his definition of the root metaphor and extend it from there. Pepper describes the root metaphor as follows:

A man desiring to understand the world looks about for a clue to its comprehension. He pitches upon some area of commonsense fact and tries [to see] if he cannot understand other areas in terms of this one. This original area becomes then his basic analogy or root metaphor. He describes as best he can the characteristics of this area, or if you will, discriminates its structure. A list of its structural characteristics becomes his basic concept of explanation and description. We call them a set of categories. In terms of these categories he proceeds to study all other areas of fact whether uncriticized or previously criticized. He undertakes to interpret all facts in terms of these categories. As a result of the impact of these facts upon his categories, he may qualify and readjust the categories, so that a set of categories commonly changes and develops. (Pepper, 1970, p. 91)

The inventor of a basic metaphor wants to comprehend an entire area of human experience or of the physical world; the scientist may adopt consciously or unconsciously the basic metaphor: "The world is mathematical" as a hypothetical assumption that motivates his theory construction. He knows that the world is not literally mathematical, for if it was, science would collapse into mathematics and scientists would have no need for experiments. But he accepts the basic metaphor as a diaphor that suggests a particular way of looking at the world; he strives to confirm his intuition by creating mathematical theories that do find empirical confirmation. And in the case of particle physics, the mathematical postulation of particles like the positron and neutrino, subsequently confirmed experimentally, has led some to assert the dictum: "What mathematics demands, nature provides." But even in particle physics, so many experimental anomalies remain that the basic metaphor "The world is mathematical" remains a diaphor.

Theologians also wittingly or unwittingly postulate basic metaphors about the world. The religious belief that God acts in history forms the basic metaphor: "The world is the arena of God's actions." This also serves as a diaphor since direct empirical confirmation of an invisible God performing overt acts in the world seems difficult if not impossible. As a basic metaphor, however, God's acting in history forms the basis for the construction of a series of theological categories that find indirect confirmation and interpretation in the lives of the faithful.

The basic metaphoric method seems so natural and fundamental to human beings in their quest for knowledge, that to deny it would make the acquisition of new knowledge almost impossible. Pepper's motive in developing the idea of four world hypotheses constructed upon the basis of root metaphors was to offer a knowledge process, structural corroboration, that produced cognitive

insights called *danda* that could parallel and incorporate the data that strict empiricists, especially the positivists, thought of as the basis of knowledge. Pepper argued that a strictly empirical position degenerated into either an impossible skepticism or a heinous dogmatism; hence, the need for a non-dogmatic and non-skeptical alternative form of epistemology, that of corroboration within a structural framework, a series of categories constructed in accord with an underlying root metaphor. In making this argument, Pepper observed the problem of self-reference based upon the success or failure of root metaphors. What guarantee do we have that the root metaphor theory itself is true and/or should be accepted? Pepper wrote:

Strangely enough, if this root metaphor is correct, its truth could only be established by the adequacy of the theories which constitute its evidence. For this theory is itself a structural hypothesis — at least, it would be such in its ultimate corroboration — and, as we have seen, a structural hypothesis only attains full confirmation in a world theory. Hence, if this theory is true, an adequate world theory will support it. This theory would then, so to speak, become absorbed in its own evidence, that is, become an item in the very theory which it is a theory about. (Pepper, 1970, p. 85)

If one describes language as metaphorical, does such a classification rest upon the presumption of the existence of literal language against which the metaphor finds contrast? Can one know a metaphor to be a “metaphor” without also the knowledge that *it is not literal*? There are those who deny such a distinction by claiming that all language is metaphorical. This claim can be made either in the belief that a basic metaphor like “language mirrors the world” underlies all language activity or in the belief that each and every sentence expresses metaphorical thinking—comprehending one thing in terms of another. Defenders of the first claim understand the everyday language that we use to be a theory about the world and since all theories rest upon basic metaphors, ordinary language necessarily presumes a basic metaphor, usually some form of the metaphor that “the world (including the physical world) is composed of language.” Proponents of the second claim base their assertion upon the observation that ordinary language is filled with dead metaphors. When new metaphors fade and die, they still remain metaphors and when we forget the metaphorical nature of ordinary language, we beguile ourselves into thinking that the hidden figurative meaning of dead metaphors no longer exists. These claimants for the position that all language is metaphorical view the literal as disguised metaphors.

The Myth of Metaphor by Colin Turbayne presents the case for the first claim that all language is metaphorical in the sense that ordinary language as a theory about the world presumes a basic metaphor (Turbayne, 1970). Turbayne sets out to examine the metaphorical assumptions of Newton and Descartes that the world is a machine. He finds nothing wrong with their presumption of a basic metaphor upon which to found their physical and metaphysical theories;

when they assumed their theories to be "literal," however, they created myths by being victimized by their own metaphor. Forgetting the metaphoric basis of a theory eliminates the tentative, hypothetical nature of the explanation. Familiarity rather than evidence transforms a metaphoric hypothesis into a literal account. Only by uncovering the basic metaphor can one show how this beguiling process has taken place; Turbayne advocates the exposure of the metaphor and then its replacement by another metaphor, a sure indication that the hidden metaphor is not literal. Turbayne attempts to show that Newton's basic metaphor of mechanism can be replaced by the basic metaphor "the world is language."

I shall therefore treat the events in nature *as if* they compose a language in the belief that the world may be illustrated just as well, if not better, by making believe that it is a universal language instead of a giant clockwork; specifically, by using the metalanguage of ordinary language consisting of "signs," "things signified," "rules of grammar," and so on, instead of the vocabulary of the machine consisting of "parts," "effects," "causes," "laws of operation," and so on, to describe it. (Turbayne, 1970, pp. 70-71)

How can we discover that we have been victimized by a metaphor if we have become so familiar with the metaphor that we believe it to be literally true? Often this can be accomplished by extending the metaphor and finding that such an extension produces absurd results. Or one can attempt to "undress" the metaphor by presenting the literal truth. Many have attempted to show the inadequacy of preceding theories or metaphysics by giving a contemporary account of the world and claiming that this present description really does literally describe how things are. The earlier theories can be seen from the present *true* explanatory account to be nothing more than myths. But such an effort to unclothe earlier theories by assuming the present account to be literal forgets that what we describe now as reality may later be similarly unclothed and exposed as resting upon the metaphorical.

The attempt to re-allocate the facts by restoring them to where they "actually belong" is vain. It is like trying to observe the rule "Let us get rid of the metaphors and replace them by the literal truth." But can this be done? We might just as well seek to provide what the poet "actually says." I have said that one condition of the use of metaphor is awareness. More accurately speaking, this means *more* awareness, for we can never become wholly aware. We cannot say what reality is, only what it seems like to us, imprisoned in Plato's cave, because we cannot get outside to look. The consequence is that we never know exactly what the facts are. We are always victims of adding some interpretation. We cannot help but allocate, sort, or bundle the facts in some way or another. (Turbayne, 1970, pp. 64-65)

Turbayne argues that whatever account we give of the world, scientific, poetic, or metaphysical, it will inevitably be metaphorical in the sense that we can never present a "literal" account of what is literal or real. To describe what is really real, we must inevitably resort to mediating devices like words or paint

strokes and these when organized into a coherent account, presume a basic metaphor as the organizing feature of their structure. If we purport to offer an account of the literal as contrasted with the metaphorical, then we face the dilemma that either (1) we present a literal account of the literal that is very likely to be shown to be a myth by later theories when the basic metaphor that we have presumed becomes exposed and shown to generate absurdities through extension; or (2) we explicitly presume a basic metaphor as underlying our differentiation between literal and metaphorical which seems to imply that one cannot present such a distinction without the circularity of assuming a knowledge of a basic metaphor. A "literal" description of the literal is impossible since description of *what is* always involves cognitive mediation. To avoid the consequences of the first horn of the dilemma, we must choose the second horn. But what are the consequences of this admission? Have we admitted defeat in our attempt to distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical by accepting the conclusion that all theories, even those about metaphor, rest upon basic metaphors? Does this mean that all language is metaphorical and that since circularity is inevitable in theories about metaphor, we must lie back and enjoy it?

By accepting the second horn, we admit that all theories are metaphorical in that they assume basic metaphors as their foundations. And a theory about metaphor must presume a basic metaphor. Score one for circularity. But this admission does not mean that all language is metaphorical, only that a theory about metaphor is metaphorical. What remains true of a theory of language does not necessarily apply to each and every sentence or combination of words. That a theory of metaphor inevitably presumes a basic metaphor does not entail that every form of language must be metaphorical. Turbayne seems implicitly to be aware of the difference between the claim that all theories, even those about metaphor or language, assume basic metaphors and the claim that each and every utterance is metaphorical, when he labels dead metaphors as possessing literal meanings.

In dead metaphors, such as "perceive," "comprehend," and "metaphor," however, the questions of homogeneity and likeness do not arise because, although the etymon overlaps its metaphorical meaning, these are overlooked by all but scholars. In dormant metaphors also, such as "high note," "to see meanings" and "lay bare feelings," both meanings have become literal. (Turbayne, 1970, p. 76)

We can admit that a theory of metaphor is itself metaphorical without the further admission that one cannot distinguish between what is literal in ordinary language and what is metaphorical. Some of those who assert that one cannot distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical because all language is metaphorical wrongly draw this conclusion from the discovery that theories of metaphor presume basic metaphors.

How are we to handle this circularity similar to that of attempting a

definition of meaning? Any definition of meaning will inevitably presume a knowledge of what the definition means. Must we resort only to a Russellian theory of types or the invocation of a metatheory to prevent our theory of metaphor from referring to itself? A basic metaphor could be a primitive term or, like an axiom, accepted intuitively and assumed to provide the basis for a theory of metaphor, existing in the meta-language and not referring to itself. Such a move might be successful in preventing paradox and avoiding circularity but it would also imply that there was at least one kind of metaphor, the basic metaphor, founded upon intuition and for which we did not require an explanatory account. Our cognitive capacities would have to include a primitive metaphorical intuition. If we possess such a primitive capacity, why not stretch this intuitive capacity to all forms of metaphor and eliminate the need for any explanatory account at all. Rather than following this line of argument, we prefer to accept the circularity. Our acceptance rests upon the belief that we are constructing a naturalistic cognitive account of metaphor instead of an axiomatic, logical, epistemological one. To construct a theory of metaphor, one must presume some knowledge of metaphor and a host of other assumptions (already learned) about language, culture, and the physical world. In dealing with natural kinds, Quine found himself in a similar circularity and his answer with respect to induction could be ours with respect to metaphor.

At this point let me say that I shall not be impressed by protests that I am using inductive generalizations, Darwin's and others, to justify induction, and thus reasoning in a circle. The reason I shall not be impressed by this is that my position is a naturalistic one; I see philosophy not as an a priori propaedeutic or groundwork for science, but as continuous with science. I see philosophy and science as in the same boat—a boat which, to revert to Neurath's figure as I so often do, we can rebuild only at sea while staying afloat in it. There is no external vantage point, no first philosophy. (Quine, 1977, p. 165)

One cannot talk about language *de novo* without some knowledge of language; similarly, one cannot talk about metaphor without certain presumptions about metaphor. Yet, we resist going so far in this direction as to posit a full metaphoric intuition that preempts the need for a theory of metaphor. Such an explanatory account, especially one that distinguished between the literal and the metaphorical, will enable us to understand better how metaphors are formed semantically, how they convey meaning, and how they convey truth. Now let us turn to that other assertion that all language is metaphorical.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have recently claimed in *Metaphors We Live By* and in "Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language" "that metaphors partially structure our everyday concepts and that this structure is reflected in our literal language" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980a). Much of the language that many of us call "literal", they argue, really is "metaphorical." They further contend that the metaphorical nature of language prevents the development of an explanatory account of meaning based solely upon literal

language. Nor can one present, they assert, an account of metaphor that derives its meaning from functions performed on literal discourse.

They devote much of their analysis to a demonstration of the systematic conceptual structures in which what they call "literal" or "conventional" metaphors of ordinary language exist. Metaphors like "Argument is war," "Time flies," and "Theories are buildings" are exemplified, carefully examined, and shown to presuppose a conceptual structure that is partially expressed in natural language. These metaphors are "alive" because they find daily use. In contrast, isolated metaphors, like "the *foot* of the mountain," "a *head* of cabbage," and "the *leg* of a table," not part of an overall conceptual scheme, are described as "dead" metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980b, p. 54, and 1980a). "Figurative" or "non-literal" metaphors arise through the extension of used parts of literal metaphors, or through the use of unused parts of literal metaphors, or through the creation of a "novel" or new metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson present "These facts are the bricks and mortar of my theory" as an example of the first type of figurative metaphor. This is an extension of the metaphor "Theories are buildings." "His theory has thousands of little rooms and long, winding corridors" is presented as an instance of the unused part of a metaphor, while "Classical theories are patriarchs who father many children, most of whom fight incessantly" offers an instance of a novel metaphor. Presumably, if these figurative metaphors become widely used and common, they will lose their tension and become conventional metaphors. Most theories of metaphor describe this process as one of "dying" or "fading" where the metaphor becomes part of ordinary, literal language. Lakoff and Johnson, however, are adamant that even if figurative metaphors become conventional or literal metaphors, they retain their metaphorical status.

By considering hundreds of dead metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson have succeeded in showing that natural language presumes and expresses many hidden conceptual meanings that arise from the use of these metaphors. But they have transformed these *dead* metaphors into *live* metaphors by redefining the notion of a dead metaphor. For Lakoff and Johnson, "dead" metaphors are alive because they are used in ordinary language as parts of systematic metaphoric expression. This redefinition of life and death for metaphors seems to have the consequence of allowing Lakoff and Johnson no method of distinguishing between metaphoric and non-metaphoric utterances. Instead they distinguish between *literal metaphors* and *figurative metaphors*. Consider their description of metaphor: "*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing or experience in terms of another*" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980b, p. 5). This description could fit any semantical meaning, the association of one word with another or the association of a word with an experience. One might be tempted to argue that all natural language was metaphorical by this definition and that the business of the analyst of language

was to distinguish one kind of metaphor from another; one should develop criteria to understand the difference between literal metaphors and figurative metaphors.

We applaud Lakoff and Johnson's efforts to find a method of distinguishing between the nonmetaphorical and the metaphorical but we find them trapped by their own insistence that most ordinary language is metaphorical. Their rejection of the literal pushes them into the almost impossible position of trying to use language that they have shown to be metaphorical (conceptual in our sense) to describe language that they claim is nonmetaphorical (concepts that emerge directly). We applaud their efforts to explain metaphor as a cognitive device rather than as only a linguistic category but they tend to assume that most conceptual language is metaphorical. Their efforts to explain the emergence of nonmetaphorical concepts in terms of experienced physical behavior fail because the expression of this behavior is mediated by what they have described as culturally based metaphorical concepts. They would have been better off to retain the notion of literal and redefine the requirements for language to be literal contrary to the claims of positivists that utterances must be precise, objective in the absolute sense, and unequivocal to be labeled as literal. Contrary to Lakoff and Johnson, we claim that one can distinguish between literal and metaphorical on the basis of culturally determined, equivocal, tentative but objective (not in the absolute sense) experience. They are certainly correct in trying to ground metaphor in experience, but we would prefer that experience to be admittedly mediated rather than claimed as direct, the latter a mysterious and surreptitious use of metaphor.

The presentation of a distinction between literal and metaphorical will not escape the adoption of a basic metaphor to undergird our theory of metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson thought that they had avoided any resort to the metaphorical by acceptance of the notion of direct emergence; but even that concept depends upon a metaphorical view of the world. What we shall argue, however, is that admission of the use of a basic metaphor to construct a theory of metaphor does not require that every sentence within a language also be described as metaphorical. But this admission does require some consideration of the charge that the explicit use of a basic metaphor to form a theory of metaphor inevitably leads to a position of linguistic relativism.

We will define the literal as the use of ordinary language to express concrete objects and events. When we employ ordinary words in their ordinary dictionary senses to describe objects or situations that are publicly available to be perceived, we are speaking literally. This does not mean that literal sentences are precise or unambiguous. Like all language, to be understood, literal sentences must be interpreted in a context. If I say "My house is cool in spite of the heat" you may interpret this to mean, "He has turned on his air conditioning" while I intend to convey the idea that my house is cool because we live in the trees. Even in the acts of ostension where I point to a nearby blue chair and

while still pointing say, "This is my favorite chair" you may correctly identify the chair and understand what I mean. But to a child learning a language or a foreign speaker just beginning to encounter English, the act of pointing and uttering the statement may not be unambiguous. For a statement to be literal, however, it does not have to be completely free from ambiguity; under some contextual circumstances it may well be ambiguous. Nevertheless, under normal circumstances a literal statement will be understood and implicitly affirmed as a proper and normal utterance. By contrast, when I say, "My favorite chair takes me everywhere, across the ocean, to the moon, and even to places that exist only in the imagination," the hearer knows that I am not speaking literally since he can recognize the semantic anomaly that a chair literally does not possess those capabilities and could only perform them figuratively. Only as I read about faraway places, or contemplate the moon or follow Don Quixote across La Mancha could my chair be said to be part of the instrumentality of reading and imagining.

Pepper's notion of a root metaphor which we have extended to the concept of a *basic metaphor* underlies any explanatory account of metaphor. Paradoxically, to explain metaphor one must presume a basic metaphor for such an explanatory theory. This circularity, however, is not fatal since we can still differentiate between literal and metaphorical statements. All language is metaphorical only in the sense that explanatory accounts of language including metaphor presume a basic metaphor upon which to construct the theory. To argue from this discovery about theories that since language considered as a whole is metaphorical (in the sense of presupposing a basic metaphor) to the conclusion that, therefore, every statement is metaphorical would be to commit the fallacy of division.

References

- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. Conceptual metaphors in everyday language. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1980, LXXVII(8), 453-486. (a)
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. (b)
- Pepper, S. C. *World hypotheses*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.
- Quine, W.V. Natural kinds. In S.P. Schwartz (Ed.), *Naming, necessity, and natural kinds*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977.
- Turbayne, C.M. *The myth of metaphor*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1970.