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Christian Ethics and Meaning: An Anti-Realist Interpretation of Metaphor

Sean Campanella

Introduction

The trend in modern Western metaethics is to treat morality as a self-sufficient rational program. Morality is held to be clearly distinct from other cultural practices, and to be most effective and compelling when it is distanced from all other influencing programs and agendas. The goal is to create the most simple and unified moral theory, capable of objectively discerning the correct course of action for all possible cases *n*.¹ Given this, distinctly Christian ethical theories are taken to be gimmicky and dogmatic to the extent that they stubbornly resist separating cognitive propositions, standards, and theories from purely emotive myths and metaphors. The purpose of this essay is to shatter this conception of Christian normative systems. I will suggest that Christian language as it stands is meaningful.

In the following discussion, I will do two things. First, I will argue that religion, as a social process, functions metaphorically, and that religious language depends on metaphor. Second, I will show how metaphor is meaningful. I will suggest that metaphor functions cognitively. This will yield the conclusion that Christian ethical language is meaningful.

Religious Language and Metaphor

Religion can be understood as a language learned. The original advocate of the "cultural-linguistic" conception of religion was George Lindbeck, who describes religion as "comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world" (Lindbeck, 32). It is not a flight of fancy to view these comprehensive schemes as essentially being *networks of metaphor*. "That all major religions," writes David Tracy, "are grounded in certain root metaphors has become commonplace in modern religious studies" (Tracy, 91). If anything, it is to argue for an expanded view of what constitutes "language" and "metaphor." The vocabularies of the languages of religion are comprised of narratives, myths, parables, texts, rituals, practices, aesthetic representations, and

¹David Copp supports this metaethical program (Copp, 16).

so on, and it is on this level that all religiously informed moral dialogue takes place.

The idea of religion as language presupposes the existence of "language communities" (the phrase is Wittgenstein's), in which the cultural-linguistic dialectic takes place. This community, of course, is constituted by the sum of the adherents who share the same religious world view (e.g., the "Christian community"). To describe the boundaries of a religious community in such simplistic terms (i.e., as if all Christians basically believed the same thing, experienced the same thing, had the same sentiments, etc.), however, is to miss the point. Just as there is not a single essential feature of games,² so a religion will "contain," or be comprised of a diversity of sub-communities, held together by an indefinite number of shared ideas and presuppositions (i.e., "family resemblances"). The kinds of communities that compose a family religion are different from one another by degree, ranging from the subtle and slight to the blatant and radical. Speaking of a religious community as a unified whole greatly mistreats the complexity of the issue; this would be to ignore the fact that denominational disputes (e.g., between Catholics and Protestants, between Lutherans and Calvinists, etc.) are, in fact, substantive disputes. Denominational differences, emerging from the various interpretations of the religion's doctrines, cosmic stories, and myths, manifest in divergent rituals, sentiments, experiences, actions, and institutions (i.e., Wittgensteinian "forms of life").

If a religion can truly be seen as a language, then the meaning of its symbol systems must be in terms of the correct use of those systems. This, of course, is a restatement of Wittgenstein's theory of meaning as use. What a religious utterance means is not something fixed; it depends on the context in which it is used and the religious competence of the users of the utterance. Lindbeck writes:

... to become religious—no less than to become culturally or linguistically competent—is to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training. One learns how to feel, act, and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated (Lindbeck, 35).

To the extent that one "masters" the language of a religion, so far is he/she trained for able interaction within its cultural-linguistic framework.

² The example is Wittgenstein's. For more on language games, see his *Philosophical Investigations*, Sect. 58-86.

Inadequacies of Alternate Paradigms

The cultural-linguistic paradigm, which treats religion as a language learned, opposes two alternative conceptions of religion: the "cognitive-propositional" paradigm and the "experiential-expressivist" paradigm. The former fails by seeking to eliminate the metaphorical aspect of religious language; it attempts to literalize its language. The latter fails by seeking to reduce the metaphorical aspect to something else; it attempts to link all forms of religious language to a common core experience that transcends language and experience.

The "Cognitive-Propositional" Paradigm

The "cognitive-propositional" paradigm equates religion with a set of axioms, definitions, and corollaries that refer "ontologically," function propositionally, and serve to differentiate the believing community from the non-believing community. Being a Christian, then, means assenting to most or all of the propositions of Christianity, perhaps in the form of a confessional statement (i.e., "I believe X, Y, Z . . ."). This view of religion doesn't work for the same reasons that treating metaphor as essentially propositional falls short: metaphor neither refers to (the realist's) ontological reality nor is reducible to a set of explicit propositions.

First, it has been shown how metaphor does not refer to ontological reality. The statement, "I attacked her thesis," does not *propose* that "it is true that I violently attempted to destroy her thesis with a large, bludgeoning object" (or some similar rendering); it does not intend to describe reality, *per se*. It rather seeks to say something which can only be described as substantial (or propositional) given a relevant context of presuppositions (i.e., what Lindbeck refers to as "intrasystemic truth") which amount to a comprehensive outlook regarding, among other things, war and argument. (For further discussion of intrasystemic truth, see Lindbeck, 64.) Likewise, as Lindbeck notes:

. . . for a Christian, 'God is Three and One,' or 'Christ is Lord' are true only as parts of a total pattern of speaking, thinking, feeling, and acting. They are false when their use in any given instance is inconsistent with what the pattern as a whole affirms of God's being and will. The crusader's battle cry 'Christus est Dominus,' for example, is false when used to authorize cleaving the skull of the infidel (even though the same words in other contexts may be a true utterance) (*Ibid.*).

This allows religious utterances to act as first order propositions. The point that the "cognitive-propositional" paradigm misses is that religious utterances cannot function this way beyond the context of the religion in question. That "God is Three and One" means very little independent of the entire slew of Christian beliefs, and means nothing at all, or is clearly false, if treated, in realist terms, as ontologically and objectively true.

Second, attempts to reduce the figurative language of religions to a set of explicit propositional statements, in the interest of preserving the cognitive value of religious utterances by making them "literal," fail by robbing them of their intrasystemic meaning as well, though in a slightly different way. The former mistake was to claim that the metaphor actually referred to something independently real; the mistake here is to claim that the metaphor in question does not actually *mean* what it *says* (it refers to something else, which is able to be stated "literally"). Thus, "God is Three and One" actually means X, where X is an explicit set of propositional (literal) statements about the Trinitarian entity identified as God. This does not mean that such a set of statements would be meaningless; it rather means that, by taking the statement "God is Three and One" out of its context in the total Christian outlook, its literal counterparts carry an entirely different meaning, and thus a different cognitive "effect." Tracy explains:

. . . if it is true that every major religion's vision of human reality is grounded in certain root metaphors that re-describe the human situation, then an elimination of the metaphorical character of religious language is effectively a substitution of one set of meanings for another . . . (Tracy, 106).

Parallel to the conclusions regarding metaphor, it can be drawn from this that religious language has significance in a way that, historically, has been little recognized.

This runs the risk, however, of over-stating the informative qualities and cognitive force that specific religious "words" (symbols, characters, etc.) carry. Retaining the metaphorical character of religious language does not mean that any sort of reinterpretation will necessarily fail to impart wisdom or insight. This sort of linguistic conservatism would be to equate explication with literalization, and that is not the point. Elaborations of religious metaphor do not rob them of their cognitive force; in fact, the effect of a religious poem or parable can be enhanced by such a process. It must be emphasized, however, that this must occur *in the context* of the given religious language-system, and that the process of explication itself is a new metaphorical act that can be added to, criticized, enhanced, and so on. This process is crippled when removed from its proper context, and this,

ultimately, is the way in which the "cognitivist-propositional" paradigm fails from the "cultural-linguistic" point of view. Lindbeck writes:

It is unable to do justice to the fact that a religious system is more like a natural language than a formally organized set of explicit statements, and that the right use of this language, unlike a mathematical one, cannot be detached from a particular way of behaving (Lindbeck, 64).

The "Experiential-Expressivist" paradigm

The "experiential-expressivist" paradigm conceives of religion as "diverse expressions or objectifications of a common core experience" (Lindbeck, 31), usually in the guise of the Ultimate, a transcendent experience which is innate in all human beings and predates self-conscious reflection. According to this model, all religions essentially refer to the same *thing*, though they articulate what that thing *is* in diverse ways (e.g., God, the Tao, Nirvana, etc.). The corresponding analogy to morality is that all ethical systems, though phrased differently, are directed towards a common, innate, and universalizable experience of the Good (a claim defended by Iris Murdoch), despite their seemingly contradictory methods and substantive claims. The cultural-linguistic model finds fault in this account of religion on the grounds that (1) there are no unschematized experiences, and (2) differently schematized experiences are different experiences.

First, the fact that there are no preconceptual experiences speaks against the "experiential-expressivist" understanding of religion. Lindbeck writes:

There are numberless thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have, and realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use the appropriate symbol systems. It seems, as the cases of Helen Keller and of supposed wolf children vividly illustrate, that unless we acquire language of some kind, we cannot actualize our specifically human capacities for thought, action, and feeling (Lindbeck, 34).

Experience, then, is conceptually organized by a particular cultural-linguistic framework prior to the self-reflective realization of what a particular experience is or entails. The idea that humans are, by their nature, endowed with a pre-cognitive transcendent-experiential matrix borders on the absurd; it is to ignore the contribution of modern social science. Peter Berger notes:

Human being cannot be understood as somehow resting within itself, in some closed sphere of interiority, and then setting out to express itself in the surrounding world. Human being is externalizing in its essence and from the beginning (Berger, 20).

Second, once human experience has been organized into coherent world views, the external differences of those world views produce different experiences. If, for instance, a certain language community has no way of symbolizing the distinction between red and orange, then the members of that community will have difficulty distinguishing between the two. This is not because their retinas or optic nerves do not function properly; it is because the experience of "red opposed to orange" has not emerged conceptually or linguistically. The "experiential-expressivist" claim that the core experience of the Ultimate is universal, regardless of its articulation, is to ignore the experientially generative power of language. Lindbeck concludes his analysis of the "experiential-expressivist" paradigm with the rejoinder:

The datum that all religions recommend something which can be called 'love' toward that which is taken to be most important ('God') is a banality as uninteresting as the fact that all languages are (or were) spoken. The significant things are the distinctive patterns of story, belief, ritual, and behavior that give 'love' and 'God' their specific and sometimes contradictory meanings (Lindbeck, 42).

The preceding section has shown how religion is comparable to language and how the "vocabulary" of religion is rooted in complex networks of metaphor which are communally specific. At this point, I will briefly show how Christian language functions in specifically metaphorical ways.

Christian Language

It is no secret that the language of Christianity is steeped in metaphor. It is perhaps less widely recognized, however, that the success of the Christian world-building project is primarily due to the figurative character of its "language."³ To the extent that Christians have utilized the capacity of their metaphorically rich language to comprehensively and coherently re-describe reality, the Christian world-building project has evolved and grown, even in the

³ I use "language" here in the broad sense suggested by Lindbeck.

face of (and perhaps because of) great social changes and ideological adversity. This is consonant with the tenet that the Christian world-building project has failed to the extent that it has attempted to abandon the figurative, and thus catechetical, character of its language.¹ The point to be learned from this is that the moral content of Christianity cannot be extrapolated from its grounding in "religious" language without trading Christian meaning for non-Christian meaning, and consequently, Christian forms of life for non-Christian forms of life. Christian ethics, therefore, is concerned, first and foremost, with being *Christian*; the ethical aspects of Christianity derive from the overall orientation of the language system.

What is the moral linguistic content of Christianity? This is roughly the same as the joint question, "How is the Christian framework organized, and what forms of life does it produce?" James Gustafson proposes that "moral action is human action in response to the governing action of God upon us" (in H. Richard Niebuhr, 16). This is a fair answer to the original question, and offers a nice, if simplistic, rendering, in Christian terms, of how the Christian "cultural linguistic" framework is ordered and what patterns of action, attitude, and belief it generates. It is clear from this that "God" is central to the Christian world-building project. The point to be drawn from this is that Christian ethical formulations can never be free from talking about God. God is a part of the language.

God

Spelling out what God means is complicated. From the modern atheist's point of view, it is clear that "God" is meaningless; in itself the symbol refers to nothing, and taken prepositionally, anything that is stated about God is clearly false or impossible to verify. Stepping inside the language of Christianity, however, and looking at how "God" is used reveals an enormously complex network of connections. Consider a small sample:

God as Creator	God as Redeemer	God as Lamb
God as Sustainer	God as Governor	God as Eternity
God as Divine Ruler	God as Rock	God as Word
God as Transcendence	God as First Cause	God as A priori
God as Judge	God as Person	God as Existence

This is by no means an exhaustive list. The point to be drawn from this is that speech about God is bound up in metaphorical utterances. There is no other way to speak about God except in relation to something else. As an example of how

¹ Late nineteenth century liberal theology provides a fair example of shifts in meaning.

these seemingly simplistic metaphors can be elaborated in profoundly meaningful ways, consider Reinhold Niebuhr's suggestion that prophetic religion supersedes the explanatory capabilities of both pantheism and Aristotelian rationalism:

The God of mythical religion is, significantly, the Creator and not the First Cause. If he were first cause (a rational conception) he would be either one of the many observable causes in the stream of things, in which case God and the world are one; or he would be the unmoved mover, in which case his relation to the world is not a vital or truly creative one. To say that God is the creator is to use an image which transcends the canons of rationality, but which expresses both his organic relation to the world and his distinction from the world. To believe that God created the world is to feel that the world is a realm of meaning and coherence without insisting that the world is totally good or that the totality of things must be identified with the Sacred (Reinhold Niebuhr, 16).

This is a glimpse of the kind of metaphorical inter-connectedness that exists in the Christian account of Genesis. God as Creator has more explanatory power than God as First Cause because it avoids the problems involved with deism and natural theology. Yet Niebuhr's explanation is no more cognitively effective, as a list of propositional statements, than the process of, say, reading and using Genesis in everyday life. The transcendent/historical God of Christianity can be defended on rational grounds, as intrasystemically more capable of accounting for experience, but the cognitive force which this rendering of God imparts does not take place on the theological level.

God is Love

Without a doubt, the metaphor that is of the most crucial significance to Christian language is God is Love. It is the fundamental notion that is ubiquitous in Christian ethics. "Love as the quintessence of the character of God," writes Niebuhr, "is not established by argument, but taken for granted. It may be regarded as axiomatic in the faith of prophetic religion" (Reinhold Niebuhr, 24). God as love is the "axis" around which Christian forms of life rotate. "This axis [God] is not fixed," writes Wittgenstein, "in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility" (Wittgenstein 1972, sect. 152; my addition). In other words, "God" does not refer to some object nor is "God," when coupled with the predicate "is love," propositional; every utterance about God necessarily fails if construed under "cognitivist-propositional"

presuppositions of meaning. That "God is love" functions, at least in part, as the certainty of meaningfulness in the *use* of Christian language (i.e., the axis which allows movement). Christians never explicitly interpret "God is love," but they are constantly talking about it. "God is love" covers the entire expanse of the language, in terms of both breadth and depth. In other words, it is not clear how anything "Christian" can be talked about without, in some way, relating to the fact that God is love. It is the inner logic, like veins coursing through a body, that informs every "Christian" thing that can be said.

Religious language depends on metaphor. Christian ethical language, then, is highly metaphorical. Our concern at this point is whether the metaphorical aspect of this language game is meaningful as are other "literal" language games. In other words, do all these metaphors mean anything? The following section reveals the ways in which metaphor is meaningful.

Introduction to Metaphor

The interest in the linguistic/conceptual possibilities of metaphor began in 1955 with Max Black's essay, "Metaphor." Black argued against the then predominant view of metaphor, a vestige of the realist heritage, that limited its function to eliciting emotive reactions in agents by revealing similarities between two given experiences.⁵ He maintained instead that metaphor had cognitive value as well as emotive, and operated not simply in uncovering pre-existing similarities rarities between experiences, but in creating new similarities between experiences that had not been previously considered. Black offered the "interactional model" in opposition to the traditional "substitution model" and the "comparison model":

Often we say, 'X is M,' evoking some imputed connection between M and an imputed L . . . in cases where, prior to the construction of the metaphor, we would have been hard put to it to find any literal resemblance between M and L. It would be more illuminating in some of these cases to say that the metaphor creates the similarity than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing (Black, 72).

Given a principal subject (X) and a subsidiary subject (M), a metaphor works by "implying" statements about the principal subject which are normally thought to

⁵ Black writes: "To draw attention to a philosopher's metaphors is to belittle him—like praising a logician for his beautiful handwriting. Addiction to metaphor is held to be illicit, on the principle that whereof one can speak only metaphorically, thereof one ought not to speak at all. Yet the nature of the offense is unclear. . . ." (63).

denote the subsidiary subject. This process of implication selectively organizes certain features of the primary subject in terms of the subsidiary subject. The "interaction" is simultaneous and results in cognitive insight which is not adequately described as "substitution" or "comparison." To those interested in the function of metaphor, Black's interaction model was revolutionary. [As Johnson notes, "Had Black not possessed impeccable credentials as an analytic philosopher, such unorthodox claims might have been taken as proper grounds for dismissal of his position" (Johnson 1981a, 20).]

Metaphor Defined

One of the main problems in discussing metaphor is the fact that it defies simple definition. Hundreds of different definitions of metaphor have been catalogued since it emerged as a hot philosophical topic, and none has been completely adequate. I do not intend to deal with this problem, so two rather broad definitions will be employed for the purpose of this essay. As a linguistic tool, "metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms of another" (Soskice, 15). As a conceptual tool, "the essence of metaphor is understanding one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing" (Lakoff and Johnson, 5). Because part of what is being argued for is that language correlates with thought, metaphor as a linguistic tool and metaphor as a conceptual tool will be treated together.

Example

One illuminating example that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson offer is the metaphor Argument Is War. Argumentation and armed conflict are clearly two different kinds of things, but as Lakoff and Johnson note,

argument is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of war. The concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured (*Ibid.*).

Thus the metaphor Argument Is War becomes embedded in ordinary language. Lakoff and Johnson prove this to be the case by offering familiar bits of speech:

Your claims are *indefensible*.
He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
His criticisms were *right on target*.
I *demolished* his argument.

I've never *won* an argument with him.
You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*
If you use that *strategy*, he'll wipe you out.
He *shot down* all of my arguments.

They continue:

It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument—attack, defense, counterattack, etc.—reflects this. It is in this sense that the Argument Is War metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing (*Ibid.*, 4).

The importance of this point is in the realization that the language we use affects the way we think and act. How we talk about argumentation not only reflects the fact that we think about it in terms of war but also reinforces the conceptual metaphor "argument is war."⁶

Cognitive Value

Metaphors are certainly odd conceptual/linguistic tools, which makes describing how they function a difficult matter. They appear to be propositions (e.g., X is M) but do not function as propositions. The statement "argument is war" is figurative; it does not literally mean that argument is a sub-category of war (i.e., "trading verbal assertions is a form of armed conflict"). Characteristically, metaphor is cognitively dubious. Metaphor, however, occupies a spectrum of cognitive states, ranging from cases where the referents are taken as equals (i.e., X literally is M, also known as "dead metaphors") to cases where the relation of the referents appears to be complete gibberish (e.g., zydeco is a set of parallel lines). Between these two extremes lie the various

⁶ This, of course, is not true of all metaphors, but as I will argue, it is true to the extent that they have become conventional.

regions of novelty, from the fresh to the cliché, that most of the metaphors we use seem to inhabit.

Several explanations have been given to make sense of the observation that metaphor is cognitively dubious, despite its elusive qualities. These explanations, more or less, either describe metaphor in terms of propositional statements or as expressive and/or prescriptive acts, depending on exactly how "novel" a metaphor is in the conceptual language. In the metaphor Argument Is War, Lakoff and Johnson argue that the metaphor has become internalized (in the language) to the point where it makes sense to ascribe it "literal" (in the sense that it is *conventional*) status. They write:

The normal way for us to talk about attacking a position is to use the words 'attack a position.' Our conventional ways of talking about arguments presuppose a metaphor we are hardly ever conscious of. The metaphor is not merely in the words we use—it is in our very concept of an argument. The language of an argument is not poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical; it is literal. We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way—and we act according to the way we conceive things (Lakoff and Johnson, 5).

This is an example of a conventionalized metaphor. Novel metaphors may have a different cognitive function. It has been suggested by Lowenberg that metaphors are directives (or "illocutionary acts," foot, see . . .). For example, Lakoff and Johnson explain how one could invite someone else to view argument not as war but as *dance*, a mutually beneficial process where "the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way" (*Ibid.*). They note that, because of the way our culture already understands and experiences the concept of argument, it would be difficult (though not impossible) to try to introduce this metaphor into the culture (i.e., people would not view this kind of activity as "arguing" at all). This difficulty, however, is due more to an unwillingness to accept the implications of a metaphor than to its cognitive vacuity. Lakoff and Johnson state:

Though questions of truth do arise for new metaphors, the more important questions are those of appropriate action. In most cases, what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor

⁷ Cohen concludes that the nebulous nature of this cognitive netherworld defies any and all throughgoing attempts at systematic metaphor detection and/or explanation (11).

but the perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it (*Ibid.*, 158).

Cognitive Function and Force

Metaphor, except perhaps in its most conventionalized forms, does not operate propositionally. It is not reducible to a certain set of propositional statements.⁸ It is important not to confuse literalization with explication. Literalization is the attempt to paraphrase what a metaphor says in terms of explicit propositional statements. Explication, on the other hand, is the attempt to enrich one's understanding of a metaphor by analyzing it in the context of what it says, without seeking to replace it with something. As Black notes, "a powerful metaphor will no more be harmed by such probing than a musical masterpiece by analysis of its harmonic and melodic structure" (Black, 79). It would be ludicrous, of course, to offer such an analysis as an accomplishment superior to the piece of music. In the same way, literal paraphrase of a metaphor fails to serve as an adequate replacement.

While figurative language is not propositional, particular metaphors often "work" better than others, in terms of effectively accounting for experience and in terms of shaping experience in the ways that we feel it ought to be shaped. Lakoff and Johnson describe the cognitive function of metaphor as "highlighting and hiding":

The very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another (e.g., comprehending an aspect of arguing in terms of battle) will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept (e.g., the battling aspects of arguing), a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 10).

To return to the Argument Is War example, one aspect of the concept of arguing that is inconsistent with this metaphor is the cooperative aspect of arguing. Because there are ways in which arguing can be seen as cooperative, these aspects must be "hidden" in the language in order for the metaphor to work.

⁸ Lowenberg writes: "A metaphor can be explicated, justified, argued for, but not adequately replaced either by a literal paraphrase or another metaphor. What the metaphor says cannot be separated from the very words in the expression" (348).

Why is this effective? Black's brief explanation, despite being inevitably vague, is helpful:

Suppose we try to state the cognitive content of an interaction metaphor in 'plain language.' Up to a point, we may succeed in stating a number of the relevant relations between the two subjects. . . . But the set of literal statements so obtained will not have the same power to inform and enlighten as the original. For one thing, the implications, previously left for a suitable reader to educe for himself, with a nice feeling for their relative priorities and degrees of importance, are now presented explicitly as though having equal weight. The literal paraphrase inevitably says too much—and with the wrong emphasis. One of the points I most wish to stress is that the loss in such cases is a loss in *cognitive* content; the relevant weakness of the literal paraphrase is not that it may be tiresomely prolix or boringly explicit—or deficient in qualities of style; it fails to be a translation because it fails to give the *insight* that the metaphor did (Black, 79).

Metaphor suppresses certain details of experience and emphasizes others. The literal paraphrase inevitably highlights inconsistencies that the metaphor hid and hides consistencies that the metaphor highlighted. In this way, it is possible for literal language to be cognitively inferior to figurative language.

Communal Aspects of Metaphor

In the prior discussion of religious language, it was shown how religious language operates in a limited communal-sense in a way that "literal" language does not. This aspect of language is true of "ordinary" metaphorical utterances as well. Ted Cohen writes:

The sense of close community results not only from the shared awareness that a special invitation has been given and accepted, but also from the awareness that not everyone could make that offer or take it up. In general, and with some obvious qualifications, it must be true that all literal use of language is accessible to all those whose language it is. But a figurative use can be inaccessible to all but those who share information about one another's knowledge, beliefs, intentions, and attitudes (Cohen, 9).

"Inside jokes" are a helpful example of the way in which metaphor works communally. When Person A tells a joke, he/she puts forth certain aspects of experience that are to be taken as "funny." Whether or not Person B "gets" the joke (i.e., finds it humorous) will depend on how much language and experience he/she holds in common with Person A. The fact that the two use the same primary (literal) language does not guarantee that the joke will be successful. If Person A and Person B share some common features of experience expressed in the joke, then Person B may "get" the joke. The extent to which Person B gets the joke will depend entirely on how much Person A and Person B hold in common. This means that Person A and Person B could share a joke and, if they are a part of a close-knit community, find it hilarious, while Person C, an "outsider," may not "get" it at all.

"Getting" a metaphor is no different than "getting" a joke; if enough language and experience is held in common, a metaphor can express details of experience in a cognitive fashion that may seem merely figurative to a person outside of the language "loop." Understanding metaphors, then, depends on where one finds oneself in the language community.

The preceding discussion has sought to discredit the "literal-truth paradigm" so cherished by realists, which treats figurative language as ornamental dressing on top of otherwise perfectly operative literal statements, and to undermine the realist conclusion that literal language is superior to figurative expression, which is ultimately based upon a narrow cognitivist theory of meaning.⁹ These conclusions give credit to the Romantic maxim which claims that, oftentimes, a poem can say infinitely more than its literal counterpart.

Christian Ethical Language is Meaningful

The fact that Christian ethical language is steeped in metaphor does not entail an inferior cognitive status. The metaphors that comprise Christian language have cognitive value and a conceptual basis. The language of metaphor

⁹ It is interesting that opponents of the "literal truth paradigm" have pointed out that literal statements, if scrutinized, are cognitively dubious as well. Goodman states, "Of course, a metaphorical sorting under a given schema is, since more novel, often less stable than the correlated literal sorting; but this is only difference of degree. The literal as well as the metaphorical may be afflicted by vagueness and vacillation of all kinds; and literal applications of some schemata are, because of the delicacy or the uncertainty of the distinctions called for, much less crisp and constant than some metaphorical applications of others. Difficulties in determining truth are by no means peculiar to metaphor" (249).

Goodman goes further and calls into question the age-old dichotomy between the cognitive and the emotive, claiming that emotions can function cognitively (247-248).

carries its own distinct meaning and is not expendable in favor of literal language. It could be argued that metaphor infects all language, that all linguistic expression is at heart metaphorical.¹⁰ Certainly science is not free from the use of metaphor. At any rate, the point is that Christian ethical systems are not to be disregarded because of their apparent linguistic incomprehensibility. If Christian language is incomprehensible, it is by no fault of the language. Some language games are more easily understood than others, but the capacity for understanding a language depends entirely on where one is situated within the language. Thus, if a person finds Christian language hard to swallow, it probably means that he/she does not "get" the language (i.e., does not understand it). This is no reason, however, to disregard it as meaningless. Our incapacity to understand all the varieties of language in the world should rather instill in us respect for the innumerable ways in which communication can take place and the different kinds of things that can be meaningful. To brashly assume that there is only one correct or meaningful way to talk about morality is no longer appropriate, even if we are limited to talking about morality in certain ways.

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¹⁰ I will not attempt to defend this claim here.

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