

# ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF GENIUS EXAMINED THROUGH REID'S THEORY OF NATURAL SIGNS

Andrew M. Stewart  
Wake Forest University

It is easy to hear or read a metaphor and identify it as such. It is harder to say just what a metaphor does or how it does it. Metaphor departs from the standard use of a word or words to express some other meaning that typical prosaic language could not achieve. Perhaps it is this ability to communicate meaning beyond the scope of ordinary usages of words that makes the use of metaphor so popular. Whatever the source of its popularity, as an unconventional, yet highly effective semiotic device, we might begin to wonder about its origins. How is it that language, with its ability to convey meaning through its arbitrary sounds and relationships, can break its own rules to convey even more meaning? Is there (1) a more fundamental relationship between things in the world on which this stretching of the structure of language relies or (2) does metaphor achieve its higher meaning through a fabrication that is just as arbitrary as the vocalized sounds which make up language?

Aristotle's theory of metaphor affirms the former in order to understand how language can break its own rules and still convey more meaning. Aristotle's realist theory of metaphor helps us answer some difficult questions about how metaphor functions since it prescribes some limits to the subjects that may be properly used in a metaphor. For Aristotle, there is some essential similarity between the actual objects compared which serves as the basis for a successful metaphor. One of the key differences between a good and bad metaphor is the selection of fitting terms. Aristotle says that the ability to create metaphors is "a sign of genius, since a good metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" (P 1459a).<sup>1</sup> But just how this functioning of 'genius' takes place is left out of Aristotle's description.

Aristotle's theory of metaphor commits him to at least the minimal claim that objects actually contain properties since metaphor is supposed to utilize similarities actually found *in* the objects that are

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*Stewart is a 1999 graduate of Wake Forest University. He plans to pursue a Ph.D. in Philosophy.*

compared to each other. Thomas Reid's realism is similar in that he believes that objects really possess the characteristics which some philosophers (he thinks) are too quick to relegate to the realm of mere sensations. In order to explain the gap between our sensations and our awareness of material bodies, Reid theorizes that (as Derose says) "sensations 'naturally suggest' or are 'natural signs' for the qualities of bodies" (322). As a result of the realism which Aristotle and Reid share, we can use Reid's theory of natural signs to give a plausible account of the workings of, and problems related to, Aristotle's idea of genius.

We begin by exploring how Aristotle's theory of metaphor commits him to the type of realism I have attributed to him. For Aristotle, "[m]etaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else" (P 1457b). The nature of this relationship seems a bit oversimplified. This definition seems to allow for the giving of *anything* the name that belongs to *any other* thing. It is clear from Aristotle's formalism towards the creation of metaphors as expounded in the *Rhetoric*, however, that Aristotle does not think metaphor creation is so open ended: "[m]etaphors . . . must be fitting, which means that they must fairly correspond to the thing signified" (R1405a). There are a few ways a metaphor may be "amiss" (R1405a) but the most crucial of these ways is the failure to pick subjects of metaphor which are similar in some essential way.

Aristotle also tells us that "[o]ne term may describe a thing more truly than another, may be more like it, and set it more intimately before our eyes" (R 1405b). It is clear from this statement that, for Aristotle, there is such a thing as good and bad metaphor making. Already we can see that not just any word can be used metaphorically with any other word for "the want of harmony between two things is emphasized by their being placed side by side" (R1405a). Not only is the choice of terms determined by some internal similarity, but to choose incorrectly exposes the failure of the choice since the subjects of the metaphor are juxtaposed as a necessary part of the form of metaphor.

The right or 'fitting' way to construct a metaphor requires "an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" (P 1459a). The similarity that a person with 'intuitive perception' (genius) can pick out is not an obvious or traditionally appreciated kind of similarity. If it were, the use of metaphor could be substituted by the standard employment of language in prosaic form but "[m]etaphor gives

style, clearness, charm, and distinction as nothing else can" and, unlike the ability to utilize and master ordinary speech, "[metaphor] is not a thing whose use can be taught by one man to another" (R 1405a). This mastery of metaphor which cannot be taught by another is the power of genius which Aristotle identifies in the *Poetics*.

Similarity can manifest itself in many different ways. Words, for example, can have similar sounding words, but Aristotle specifically has the hidden similarity of things in the real world (in 18th century terms, he has an anti-sensationalist view of the similarity of things compared with metaphor) in mind: "Metaphors must be drawn . . . from things that are related to the *original thing*, and yet not obviously so related" (R 1412a, my emphasis). These 'original things' mostly include actual objects in the world which have specific, similar properties, but they can also include things like actions: in one of his examples of a fitting metaphor, Aristotle uses the substitution of the word "draw" for "sever" (P 1457b).

It is not so crucial to note that Aristotle's theory of metaphor hinges on the use of similar *objects* in the real world. It is, however, very important to realize that the properties Aristotle believes make terms proper subjects for metaphors are independent of the term; the properties are a part of the term but only because the term points to something real (whether it be an object or an action or whatever) that actually *has* those characteristics. Metaphors are only as good as the similarities they point out between real things with real characteristics, they do not simply "create similarity and resemblance" (Danesi 323) out of two completely dissimilar things.

It is clear that Aristotle's theory of metaphor is grounded on the real existence of things and the properties they possess. Furthermore, Aristotle says that the ability to construct metaphors is dependent on the ability to grasp hidden similarities in things that are otherwise (on the surface) completely dissimilar. But how can we make sense of this power of genius? It is the power of genius which makes a person able to create fitting metaphors. Genius is an ability to pick out similarities that are already in dissimilar things and put them into metaphorical form, though not everyone has this ability. Moreover, genius is not a thing that one person can teach another. Genius, then, must be a power that is either developed through specific types of life experience (independent of a human "teacher") or one with which a person is born. Regardless of the cause of genius, the odd thing is that the experience of the power of metaphor is not

restricted to those with genius. In other words, although only those with genius can *create* metaphors, a great many more people can receive and *appreciate* metaphors. Once similarities in seemingly dissimilars are brought to their attention by the person with genius, these receivers can appreciate the subtle similarities in otherwise dissimilar things. If this were not the case, the power of metaphor would be severely restricted since it would only be useful to those with the power of genius in the first place. Indeed, it is hard to believe that Aristotle would claim that rhetoricians "must pay careful attention to metaphor" (R 1405a) when "the technical study of rhetoric is concerned with the modes of persuasion" (R 1355a) and these 'modes of persuasion' must be "notions possessed by everybody" (R 1355a) in order for rhetoric to effectively persuade.

Now that it is clear that even those without genius can appreciate the similarities made explicit through metaphor, a new question arises. We no longer need to know how the power of genius works, instead we need to understand how universal appreciation of metaphor can take place without universal possession of genius. One plausible explanation for the intelligibility of this state of affairs can be given using Reid's concept of natural signs. Before we can understand how Reid's natural signs can explain Aristotle's problematic theory of metaphor reception, it is important that we explore some of their characteristics.

Reid defines natural signs in contradistinction to artificial signs. Artificial signs are those which "[arise] from some agreement among mankind" (LFA 29).<sup>2</sup> Artificial signs are purely arbitrary signs which do signify, but only because they have been designated and learned by some group of people. Natural signs, on the other hand, "are understood by anyone, as smoke is universally understood to show that there is fire or as a sign of fire" (LFA 29). There are three types of natural signs which are distinguished by the manners in which the connection of sign to that which is signified is made apparent in humans. The connection of the first kind of natural sign to its object is made through experience. The example of smoke being a natural sign of fire is an example of one such natural sign since, although the connection of the sign to the object is natural, it is only through experience that we can come to know this connection. The second type of natural sign is "not only established by nature but discovered to us by a natural principle, without reasoning or experience" (IHM 44). An example of this type of natural sign is the facial expression

one makes when expressing a certain emotion. The ability to understand these expressions is not gained by experience, but is a product of "the constitution of human nature" (LFA 30). The third type of natural sign suggests things of which we "never before had any notion or conception" but give us grounds to "create a belief of [them]" (IHM 44). I will focus on the second type of natural sign since it is "the foundation of the fine arts, or of taste" (IHM 45) and the understanding of metaphor falls under the category of taste.

While exploring the notion of grandeur as an attribute of things which please taste, Reid makes it clear that "power, wisdom, and goodness, are properly the attributes of mind only. They are ascribed to the work figuratively, but are really inherent in the author" (EIP 496). He asks the question: "Is there no real grandeur in material objects?" (EIP 497). Reid asks this question because he seems to have gotten himself into trouble with one of his earlier claims—namely, that "the object has its excellence from its own constitution, and not from ours" (EIP 495).

In "Objectivity and Expression in Thomas Reid's Aesthetics," Josefine Nauckhoff solves this seemingly devastating problem by explaining how attributes of mind may subsist in objects through the presence of natural signs (of the second type). Natural signs function as material significations of attributes of mind. Nauckhoff explains how "Reid thinks we have direct access to the meaning of these signs. We do not need to interpret them in order to know what they express" (187). The truth of this statement lies in the fact that natural signs about which she is speaking fall under the second type of natural signs that "are discovered to us by a natural principle, without reasoning or experience" (IHM 44). The upshot of our having direct access to this type of natural sign is that "we do not need to 'read' excellence 'into' a sign which naturally signifies an excellence; rather, the excellence is directly expressed by the sign" (Nauckhoff 187). Now it should be clear how the excellence is both in the object as expressed through natural signs as well as originally the '[attribute] of mind only.'

It is important that natural signs do more than merely point to excellence since Reid presents a theory of metaphor based on their *actual* similarities:

The various objects which nature presents to our view, even

those that are most different in kind, have innumerable similitudes, relations, and analogies, which we contemplate with pleasure, and which lead us naturally to borrow words and attributes from one object to express what belongs to another. The greatest part of every language under heaven is made up of words borrowed from one thing, and applied to something supposed to have some relation or analogy to their first signification. The attributes of body we ascribe to mind, and the attributes of mind to material objects (EIP 501).

Just like Aristotle, Reid theorizes that metaphors are created as a result of “innumerable similitudes, relations, and analogies which we contemplate with pleasure.” For Reid the creation of a metaphor takes place “by ascribing to [the objects of sense] intellectual qualities which have some analogy to those they *really possess*” (EIP 497, my emphasis). On Reid’s account, creation of a metaphor means more than for Aristotle since a basis in objects of sense is a basis in *natural signs*.

How does all of this help us with the problem of universal reception of metaphor in Aristotle’s theory? Recall that Aristotle thinks that genius “implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars” that “cannot be learnt from others.” For Aristotle, those subjects that are capable of systematic study are rightly defined as arts. The man of art is thought to be wiser than the man of experience “because the former know[s] the cause, but the latter do[es] not” (M 981a). Because of the conceptual nature of an art, the artist “can teach, and therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is” (M 981b). Since the conceptual nature of art is the characteristic which makes art teachable, it follows that something that is not teachable must not be based on concepts.<sup>3</sup> The importance of the unteachable nature of the power of genius is now clear: genius is non-conceptual.

The non-conceptual nature of the foundations of Aristotle’s theory of metaphor is crucial to its relationship with Reid’s natural signs of the second type. Recall that the reason these signs need no interpretation is because they are “discovered to us by a natural principle, without reasoning or experience.” So we know that the natural signs on which metaphors are based are not the product of reasoning. Reasoning deals with concepts, so we can say that natural signs — Reid’s basis for the reality of metaphor — are non-conceptual.

Furthermore, if we substitute similarity of Reid's natural signs as the basis for metaphor for Aristotle's ambiguous "similarity in dissimilars," we get a non-conceptual basis for a non-conceptual process. The only thing left is to show how this relationship entails the possibility of universal appreciation of metaphors without universal possession of non-conceptual genius. If we consider the other characteristic of the second type of natural signs — that they are not derived through experience — we must conclude, with Reid, that their connections must be made known "by some original principle" (LFA 30). This original principle is resolved by Reid "into the constitution of human nature" (LFA 30). Since the second type of natural sign must automatically be discovered by everyone since it is within the "constitution of human nature," the ability to comprehend similarities between natural signs and intellectual qualities in cleverly constructed metaphors must be available to all.

It is true that "we find pleasure in *discovering* relations, similitudes, analogies, and even contrasts that are not obvious to *everyeye*" (EIP 497, my emphasis), but this process of 'discovering' (which is not open to all) is different than the process of grasping similarities already brought out through metaphor (which must be open to all since the knowledge of how natural signs signify must be available to all people as a part of their human constitution). The discovering process is an active one through which we "connect [similitudes and analogies between things of very different nature] in our imagination and ascribe to one what properly belongs to the other" (EIP 497). It is this activity which differentiates the two processes of metaphorical cognition (discovery and reception) and makes it possible for Reid to claim that in one sense (the creative, active sense), the similarities are not open to all but in another sense (the receptive passive sense), since the similarities are based on the human constitution, they must be open to all.

The synthesis of Reid's theory of natural signs can fill out some of the ambiguities of Aristotle's otherwise outstanding theory of metaphor. By pointing to similarities in Reid's natural signs as the source of correctly executed metaphor, we can make sense of Aristotle's process of genius (as Reid's active process of imagination). Perhaps more importantly, we can resolve the difficulties arising from the restriction of metaphor to those with genius while the power of metaphor through comprehension remains available to

all. In the end, the combination of Aristotle's theory of metaphor with Reid's theory of natural signs gives us a solid explanation not only of how metaphor functions, but how this functioning is possible with a basis in the real properties that belong to actual things.<sup>4</sup>

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Citations from Aristotle are abbreviated as follows: P=*Poetics*, R=*Rhetoric* and M=*Metaphysics*.

<sup>2</sup> All citations from Reid are abbreviated as follows: LFA=*Lectures on the Fine Arts* in *Thomas Reid's Lectures on the Fine Arts*, EIP=*Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* in *The Works of Thomas Reid*, vol. 1., and IHM=*Inquiry into the Human Mind* quoted from excerpts in *Thomas Reid* (page numbers given from *Thomas Reid*)

<sup>3</sup> Since All Conceptual things are Teachable things, the contrapositive of this statement, All non-Teachable things are non-Conceptual things, must be true.

<sup>4</sup> I wish to thank Josefina Nauckhoff and Marcus Hester for their helpful discussions about this paper.

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