



BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Enabling open access to Birkbeck's published research output

The dispensability of metaphor

Journal Article

<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/5279>

Version: Accepted (Refereed)

Citation:

Grant, J. (2010)
The dispensability of metaphor
British Journal of Aesthetics 50(3), pp.255-272

© 2010 Oxford Journals

[Publisher Version](#)

All articles available through Birkbeck ePrints are protected by intellectual property law, including copyright law. Any use made of the contents should comply with the relevant law.

[Deposit Guide](#)

Contact: lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk

The Dispensability of Metaphor

Many philosophers claim that metaphor is indispensable for various purposes. What I shall call the *Indispensability Thesis* is the claim that:

We use at least some metaphors to think, to express, to communicate, or to discover what cannot be thought, expressed, communicated, or discovered without metaphor.

Versions of this thesis are advocated in a remarkable variety of areas: one finds it supported by aestheticians, metaphysicians, linguists, philosophers of language, philosophers of science, and philosophers of religion. But one finds it more often asserted than argued for. I wish to examine arguments for it. I shall argue that support for the Indispensability Thesis is based on several confusions.

I

Stephen Yablo defends a version of the Indispensability Thesis by linking metaphor to make-believe.¹ Influenced by Kendall Walton,² Yablo points out that the real properties of props used in a game of make-believe can help determine what we are to imagine in that game. For example, if the mud-cake is, in reality, too big for the tree-stump, we are to imagine that the pie is too big to fit in the oven. Because of this, we could make an assertion within a game as

a way of giving voice to a fact holding *outside* the game: the fact that the props are in such and such a condition, viz., the fact that makes [what we pretend to assert] a proper thing to pretend to assert.³

You could say, 'The pie is too big to fit in the oven', to give voice to the real-world fact that the mud-cake is too big to fit in the tree-stump.

According to Yablo, metaphors are like pretend-assertions used for this purpose. A metaphor suggests a game of make-believe in which what is described metaphorically is used as a prop. If you describe Italy as a boot, that suggests a game in which Italy is used as a boot-prop. By using a metaphor, we represent what we describe as having properties that would make our utterance appropriate in a game suggested by the metaphor.⁴

A metaphor is 'pretence-worthy' when the object does have properties that would make our utterance appropriate in such a game. For example, 'Crotona is in the arch of the Italian boot' is pretence-worthy because Italy and Crotona have properties that make it appropriate to imagine, in a game in which Italy is used as a boot-prop, that Crotona is in its arch. What Yablo calls the 'metaphorical content' of a metaphor is given by the worlds in which the same sentence, meaning the very same thing, is pretence-worthy.⁵

Yablo argues that some metaphors are 'representationally essential'. That is, there is no way to access the 'ensembles of worlds picked out by their shared property of legitimating a certain pretence' except via metaphor:

the language might have no more to offer in the way of a unifying principle for the worlds in a given content than that *they* are the ones making the relevant sentence fictional. It seems at least an open question, for example, whether the clouds we call *angry* are the ones that are literally *F*, for any *F* other than 'such that it would be natural

and proper to regard them as angry if one were going to attribute emotions to clouds'.⁶

So Yablo's version of the Indispensability Thesis is the claim that some metaphors are indispensable means of accessing the ensembles of worlds that they enable us to access. His support for this conclusion is the claim that, for some metaphors, there is no unifying principle for the ensemble of worlds they enable us to access.⁷ However, if Yablo is right about the connection between metaphor and make-believe, then this premise is false.

If Yablo is right, then the ensemble of worlds we access by characterizing Italy metaphorically as a boot is the ensemble of worlds in which Italy is suitable for use as a boot-prop. That, however, provides a unifying principle for that ensemble: what unifies them is that they are the worlds in which Italy is suitable for use as a boot-prop.⁸ A similar unifying principle must be available for any ensemble of worlds to which a metaphor gives us access, if Yablo is right about the connection between metaphor and make-believe. It will always be the set of worlds in which what is characterized metaphorically is suitable for use as a certain kind of prop. So if he is right about metaphor and make-believe, the premise on which he rests his claim that some metaphors are indispensable means of accessing certain ensembles of worlds is false.

Yablo might reply that, although this premise of his argument is false, this is not a serious problem. Granted, the principle I have mentioned would be a unifying principle. It would be a uniquely specifying description of the ensemble of worlds to which the metaphor gives us access. But it does not

itself give us access to that ensemble of worlds. The metaphor, by contrast, does give us such access. And we need certain metaphors in order to access the worlds they enable us to access.

Evidently, the plausibility of these claims depends on what 'accessing' an ensemble of worlds amounts to. For one thing, it had better not be the case that being able to tell whether or not a world belongs to an ensemble E is sufficient for accessing E. We would be able to tell this if (i) we knew that the worlds in E are all and only the worlds in which (for example) Italy would be a suitable boot-prop, and (ii) we were able to tell whether a world is one in which Italy is suitable for use as such a prop. To have such knowledge and to have (and exercise) such an ability, we do not need to use a metaphor. It may be, of course, that we have the ability to use metaphor only if we have the ability to judge a thing's suitability as a prop in a game. But that does not imply, nor is it true, that we need to use a metaphor in order to judge whether something would be a good prop in a game.

Alternatively, Yablo might claim that to access a set of worlds is to grasp a proposition. And whatever proposition is communicated by the metaphor 'Italy is a boot', it is clearly *not* the proposition that Italy is suitable for use as a boot-prop. After all, we wouldn't normally use such a metaphor in order to make a point about how Italy could be used as a prop. Rather, the proposition communicated is true iff Italy is suitable for use as a boot-prop. But to grasp the proposition communicated by the metaphor is not to grasp the proposition that Italy is suitable for use as a boot-prop. Therefore, although the principle I mention above would be a uniquely specifying

description of the set of worlds in which the proposition communicated by the metaphor is true, it would not give us *access* to them. It would not communicate the same proposition.

There are two things to say in response to this defence. First, it is true that the proposition communicated when we say (for example), 'Italy is suitable for use as a boot-prop', is not (normally) communicated with the metaphor, 'Italy is a boot'. And I certainly do not mean that what is stated with the former sentence would be communicated with the metaphor. I mean that such cases provide counterexamples to Yablo's claim that there is sometimes no unifying principle for the ensembles of worlds that, on his account, metaphor enables us to access.

Second, even if 'grasping a proposition' is what Yablo means by 'accessing an ensemble of worlds', there is a further problem with his position. The further problem is that the argument he gives fails to support the conclusion that some metaphors communicate propositions that cannot be communicated without metaphor. Suppose there is no literally ascribable property such that:

- (i) All clouds properly called 'angry' share it, and
- (ii) We are characterizing clouds as having it when we call clouds 'angry'.

This is a way of strengthening Yablo's claim that there is no unifying principle for the worlds to which some metaphors give us access. This premise, unlike the original claim about unifying principles for worlds, does appear to be true.

But this does not show that 'angry' is ever used to attribute a property that cannot be attributed without metaphor. It does not show that metaphor is ever used to communicate an (otherwise incommunicable) proposition about clouds. Rather, it may simply indicate that 'angry' can be used to attribute different properties on different occasions of its use as a metaphorical characterization of clouds. Many (perhaps all) expressions used metaphorically are like this. For example, the people we call 'green' can be inexperienced, or sick-looking, or youthful. There is no literally ascribable property such that they all share it and we are characterizing people as having it every time we call someone 'green'. But plainly, this is not because we are using metaphor to attribute a property that cannot be attributed without metaphor.

Other examples are easily found. When John Major is described metaphorically as 'grey', he is characterized very differently than a 'grey area' in morality or law is. Muhammad Ali called Joe Frazier a 'gorilla' as an insult; a primate scientist might use the same expression as a compliment, characterizing someone as gentle and peace-loving. And as for clouds, they are sometimes described as 'angry' to indicate that they appear to be storm-clouds, and sometimes to indicate that they look like something angry; and many other uses are surely possible.⁹ This does not support the conclusion that we ever use 'angry' metaphorically to communicate a proposition incommunicable without metaphor.

Yablo also holds that some metaphors are 'procedurally essential'. He argues that sometimes, the metaphor-user is not (or not merely) using

metaphor to communicate a certain message that she has in mind, but to prompt her audience to discover things of which she herself may be unaware:

Someone who utters *S* in a metaphorical vein is recommending the project of (i) looking for games in which *S* is a promising move, and (ii) accepting the propositions that are *S*'s inverse images in those games under the modes of presentation that they provide. The overriding principle here is *make the most of it*; construe a metaphorical utterance in terms of the game or games that retromap it onto the most plausible and instructive contents in the most satisfying ways.¹⁰

Now, we do need the concept of a game of make-believe to carry out this procedure. But we do not need to use *S* metaphorically in order to think of games within which *S* is a promising move, nor to think of what plausible and instructive propositions would have to be true for it to be a promising move. After all, for *S* to be a promising move within a game is for it to be appropriate to use *S literally* within a game of make-believe involving the object as a prop. At least, judging by what Walton and Yablo say, for 'Crotone is in the arch of the boot' to be pretence-worthy is for it to be appropriate to pretend to assert, literally, that Crotone is in the arch of the boot. To use *S* literally within a game is, obviously, not to use it metaphorically within the game. Neither is it to use *S* metaphorically outside the game. An actor playing a character who is speaking literally is not himself speaking metaphorically. So if I invite you to think of games in which *S* is a promising move, I am thereby inviting you to think of scenarios in which it would be appropriate to use *S* in a certain non-metaphorical way. If there is a sound argument to show

that, in order to think of scenarios in which *S* is used in this non-metaphorical way, we must use *S* metaphorically, Yablo does not provide it. Even if Yablo and Walton are right that some metaphors ought to be understood in terms of games of make-believe, nothing they say shows that we need metaphor to think of the games metaphors suggest. Therefore, even if these games are indispensable for some purpose that metaphor achieves, it does not follow that metaphor is too.

II

Berys Gaut holds that metaphors used in art criticism are often indispensable.¹¹ Thinking of the metaphor, according to Gaut, is often the only way to have the experience the metaphor provides. This is 'because of the role of metaphor in classification',¹² and because the way we classify affects the way we experience.

He asks us to imagine that a critic gets us to attend to various properties of a Kandinsky by describing it as 'alive with movement':

The metaphor classifies together a motley bunch of properties: properties of vibrancy, subdued violence, extreme contrasts of saturation and hue, having jagged edges, acentric composition, a sense of fluctuation in pictorial depth, and so on. ... How does one decide how to extend this list? There is such diversity here that we have no sense of how to carry on – except by use of the master-metaphor of being alive with movement. And certainly there is no reason to classify together these diverse properties other than because of their connection

to the metaphor. So the metaphor cannot be discarded: it guides our ability to group these properties with each other, grounds our sense that they belong together.

Further, we are aware not just that these properties belong together, but also that what makes this the case is that they are all connected to the metaphor.¹³

So Gaut's claim is that we need the metaphor of the Kandinsky as alive with movement in order to:

- (a) tell us 'how to carry on' extending the list of properties he mentions;
- (b) ground 'our sense that they belong together'; and
- (c) tell us why they belong together.

The basis for this is the claim that 'there is no reason to classify together these diverse properties other than because of their connection to the metaphor'.

But this premise is false. There is another reason to classify together the properties the metaphor classifies together: they are all connected to the property, *being alive with movement*. They are connected to it in various ways. Some of the properties of the forms are also properties of creatures alive with movement (e.g., causing a sense of fluctuation, violence). Others are properties in virtue of which the forms share properties with creatures alive with movement: extreme contrasts of saturation and hue, for example, can make forms seem to leap out at us, and vibrant colours can arrest our attention. Still others are properties the picture shares with pictures of things alive with movement: acentric composition can be used (along with other

features) to show that what is depicted is moving fast, and jagged edges can be used to suggest erratic motion, or the path of something moving erratically.

If the properties the metaphor draws to our attention are all connected to the property of being alive with movement, then this undermines Gaut's argument for the Indispensability Thesis. For in that case, knowing what properties are connected to the property of being alive with movement, and being able to identify them in the Kandinsky, would:

- (a) tell us how to carry on extending the list of properties he mentions,
- (b) ground our sense that they belong together, and
- (c) tell us why they belong together.

And one can have such knowledge and exercise such an ability without the metaphor of the Kandinsky as alive with movement.

Gaut comes close to acknowledging that the properties a metaphor classifies together are connected to something other than the metaphor. He writes:

A person who classified together all and only artworks we call 'sad', but denied any connection between them and sadness, would have failed to grasp the aesthetic property we were indicating – would have failed to grasp the sadness of these things, and so would have missed what was of primary interest to us. Hence there could not be a person whose experience and understanding of a work was as ours is, but who did not have a grasp of the metaphor in terms of which we classify features of the work.¹⁴

The conclusion does not follow. The fact that you must accept that there is a connection between certain artworks and sadness in order to grasp the sadness of those works does not show that you need *a metaphor* to grasp their sadness. It only shows that you need the concept of sadness to do so.

III

Elisabeth Camp argues that 'Not everything that can be meant can necessarily be given literal expression, even in a private language'.¹⁵ Sometimes, according to Camp, we need metaphor to express, and not merely to communicate to others, what we use it to express.

Developing considerations advanced by Richard Boyd,¹⁶ Camp asks us to suppose that we are scientists investigating sub-personal cognitive processes. We want to identify a certain kind of causally efficacious property. However, we don't know much about properties of this kind. We know something about the property's causal relations, but not enough to define it in functional terms; nor can we identify the properties ostensively.

This is where metaphor comes in. Camp writes:

We can still make theoretical and experimental progress, though, by thinking metaphorically – for example, by exploiting the metaphor of memory storage and retrieval as the opening of a computer file....

Research progresses, in part, by investigating specific candidate similarities that might underwrite the analogical equations that are implicit in such metaphors. As we establish some similarities and rule

out others, our cognitive access to the properties under investigation becomes more fully and literally conceptualized. At some point, if investigation progresses well, we may well be able to dispense with the metaphor in favor of a new, literally applicable concept. But at this early stage of our inquiry, the metaphor plays an essential role in fixing what we are thinking about.¹⁷

On the contrary: at *no* stage do we need metaphor to do what Camp is describing. Consider what the scientist is doing. She is investigating whether memory has certain properties that it would share with the process of opening a computer file if it has them. Her research is guided by the hypothesis that memory does share properties with the process of opening a computer file. On the basis of this hypothesis, she tries to establish, for various properties that memory would share with this process if it has them, whether memory does have them.

To conduct her research in this way, the scientist needs the concept, *opening a computer file*. She also needs to know what properties the process of opening a computer file has. But she does not need metaphor, at any stage, in order to do this. The fact that the concept of opening a computer file plays an essential role in this process misleads Camp and Boyd into claiming that the *metaphor* of memory as the opening of a computer file does.

Camp responds to an objection like the one I have presented. She considers the objection that we might make explicit the implicit analogical equation through which the metaphor fixes the property we want to investigate by using a literal description, such as:

(8) The property of cognition that causes memory retrieval in a manner that is analogous in some theoretically relevant respect to opening a folder in a computer program.¹⁸

Her response is that

identifying the denotation of a literal description like (8) requires the same cognitive capacity as the original metaphor does. We still need to identify which particular similarities are relevant, and then construct a positive concept of the appropriate property on that basis.¹⁹

But this response does not vindicate the Indispensability Thesis. If correct, it shows at most that a capacity required for the comprehension of metaphor is also required, in this situation, in order to fix what we are thinking about. It does not show what her argument purports to show: that metaphor itself, in this situation, plays an essential role in fixing what we are thinking about.

IV

In these cases, philosophers hold that we need metaphor in order to ϕ . I have replied that, if we do use metaphor to ϕ , then we do not *need* metaphor in order to ϕ . I have argued for this by pointing out other ways of ϕ -ing. If I am right that there are other ways in which we can ϕ , that is sufficient to show that the version of the Indispensability Thesis in question is untrue.

But it is also noteworthy that, in several of these cases, there is something else we clearly *do* need in order to ϕ . We need the concept of sadness in one of the cases Gaut discusses,²⁰ and the scientist needs the concept of opening a computer file in order to conduct her research in the

way Camp describes. We need, in such cases, what I shall call 'the concept applied metaphorically'. The concept applied metaphorically is the concept literally expressed by the expression being used metaphorically: so, for example, the concept of being alive with movement is applied metaphorically in the metaphor of the Kandinsky as alive with movement. The discussion above suggests that at least part of the reason the Indispensability Thesis seems plausible to some of its supporters is that they are confusing the concept applied metaphorically with the metaphor itself.

This diagnosis is supported by another consideration. Advocates of the Indispensability Thesis not only say that metaphor is essential for a certain purpose when, in fact, it is the concept applied metaphorically that is essential. The cases in which some of them allow that metaphor is *dispensable* for some purpose are cases in which this concept is dispensable for that purpose.

Roger Scruton, for example, writes:

I can spell out *homo homini lupus* [man is a wolf to man], for instance, by describing the known facts of man's aggression towards his fellows.... For all intents and purposes, it is dispensable.²¹

Frank Sibley makes the following comment on a metaphor used to describe a wine, 'it will never win a race but it's a wonderful little jogger':

We know exactly the prosaic meaning of this last one: 'not top class but a satisfying day-to-day tipple you won't get tired of'. Here the metaphor performs no irreplaceable function; it is dispensable....²²

These metaphors are indeed dispensable. And there is indeed a difference between these metaphors and others. But the difference is not that these metaphors are dispensable and others are not.

When we use these metaphors, if Scruton and Sibley are right about them, we are not primarily interested in the fact that the item described metaphorically *shares* certain properties with what the concept applied in the metaphor literally applies to (or, if talk of being interested in facts is inappropriate here: we are not primarily interested in *their sharing* of certain properties²³). Rather, we are primarily interested in the fact that what is metaphorically described *has* these properties (or: in their *having* these properties). A user of *homo homini lupus*, for example, is not primarily interested in the fact that people share the property of aggressiveness with wolves. Rather, she is mainly interested in the fact that people *are* aggressive towards each other. Similarly, the wine critic is not primarily interested in communicating that the wine's failure to be top-class, and its being consistently good nevertheless, are properties it shares with wonderful little joggers who will never win a race. Her point, if Sibley is right, is that it has these features.

Sometimes, however, we *are* primarily interested in the item's sharing of features when we use a metaphor. Bernini's colonnade around St Peter's Square has been described as 'the arms of the Church, embracing her flock'. It has a shape of a kind that embracing arms also have. The point of describing it as 'the arms of the Church', however, is not merely to draw attention to that shape. It is to point out that the colonnade shares that shape with pairs of

embracing arms. Appreciating the colonnade involves noticing this, for the building expresses welcome by sharing a shape with a gesture that does.

By saying this, I am not committing myself to the view that a proposition about the sharing of properties is part of the content of some or all metaphors. I am not, for example, advancing or relying on the claim that the embracing-arms metaphor expresses the proposition that Bernini's colonnade shares that shape with pairs of embracing arms. My point is that metaphors at least sometimes draw our attention or direct our thoughts to the sharing of properties. It is not that they always have this effect, or that they ever do it by expressing a proposition about property-sharing. Sometimes the metaphor-user is primarily interested in having this effect, and sometimes she is not. Davidson, who certainly would not accept that a proposition about the sharing of properties is part of the content of a metaphor, could accept the claim I am making here. It is a point only about what the reader or hearer of a metaphor is sometimes made to notice or think about, and about what effects the metaphor-user is interested in having. It is not a point about what metaphors mean.

Now, what is true of the metaphors Scruton and Sibley discuss is that, to do what we are mainly interested in doing with them, we do not need the concepts applied metaphorically. To point out what the user of *homo homini lupus* is primarily interested in pointing out (people's aggressiveness, etc.), the metaphor-user needn't use the concept of a wolf. This leads some philosophers to say that, in such cases, she needn't use *the metaphor* to communicate what she wants. As it happens, this is true; but it is the same

confusion of metaphors with concepts applied metaphorically that leads them to say it.

By contrast, to do what we are interested in doing with the metaphor of Bernini's colonnade as the arms of the Church, we need the concept of embracing arms. So there is a genuine distinction to be made among metaphors with respect to the dispensability of the concept applied metaphorically. But if we need to use the concept applied metaphorically in order to ϕ , it does not follow that we need to use it *by* applying it metaphorically.

V

It is important to be clear about what is at issue when metaphors are said to be indispensable.

First, there are trivially true versions of the Indispensability Thesis, and these are plainly not at issue. For some things we use metaphor to think, to express, to communicate, or to discover, it is trivially true that we need metaphor in order to think, express, communicate, or discover them. For example, we obviously cannot discover, without at least thinking of metaphor, that a given metaphor draws our attention to a certain feature or fact. The modality of the version of the Indispensability Thesis being advocated also affects how interesting that version is. Friends of indispensability sometimes distinguish their position from the view that metaphor is sometimes needed to communicate something we merely happen to lack non-metaphorical means of communicating.²⁴ If we lack such non-

metaphorical means, but could easily develop them (and do so without metaphor), that would not establish the truth of an especially interesting version of the thesis. Beyond this, however, advocates of the thesis do not always make clear the modality of the version they advocate.

Second, the Indispensability Thesis is not a claim about the *manner* in which we think, express, communicate, or discover things when we use metaphor to do so. Where ϕ -ing ranges over thinking, expressing, communicating and discovering, it is not the view that we could not ϕ *in such-and-such a way* without metaphor. It is the view that *what* we ϕ with some metaphors cannot be ϕ 'ed without metaphor.

One might hold, to take one example, that a single metaphor can communicate many propositions, and that these propositions are emphasized to different degrees when we use the metaphor to communicate them. One might also hold that there is no other way to communicate those propositions with just that distribution of emphasis. An oft-quoted complaint Max Black makes about the attempt to state the content of certain metaphors in plain language is that when we attempt to do so, the metaphor's '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'.²⁵ The Indispensability Thesis is not the view that metaphor is indispensable for communicating in this, or any other, manner.

Third, I have so far said nothing about the *paraphrasability* of metaphors. Several philosophers hold that at least some metaphors cannot be

paraphrased. One might think that this claim implies the truth of the Indispensability Thesis. This would be a mistake. In fact, the claim that some metaphors cannot be paraphrased does not imply the truth of the Indispensability Thesis, although the claim that we use metaphor to communicate or to express what cannot be communicated or expressed without metaphor (which is a version of the Indispensability Thesis) implies that metaphors cannot be paraphrased.²⁶ There are several philosophers whose views commit them to the claim that metaphors cannot be paraphrased, but not to the Indispensability Thesis.

Davidson, for example, holds that a paraphrase would give the non-literal meaning or special cognitive content of the metaphor. But according to him, metaphors have no non-literal meaning or special cognitive content. Therefore, they cannot be paraphrased. He writes:

I agree with the view that metaphors cannot be paraphrased, but I think this is not because metaphors say something too novel for literal expression but because there is nothing there to paraphrase. ... metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact - but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact.

If this is right, what we attempt in 'paraphrasing' a metaphor cannot be to give its meaning, for that lies on the surface; rather we attempt to evoke what the metaphor brings to our attention.²⁷

Davidson is committed to the view that metaphors cannot be paraphrased (although he acknowledges that there is a point to the activity we *call* 'paraphrase'). But he is not committed to the Indispensability Thesis. He does

not claim that there is a content expressed or communicated by metaphor that no non-metaphorical paraphrase can express or communicate. He claims that there is *no* special cognitive content expressed or communicated by metaphor. From this, it follows that metaphors cannot be paraphrased. But it also follows that metaphors are not indispensable for the expression or communication of such a content. Of course, if Davidson had said that what metaphor brings to our attention cannot be discovered without metaphor, then he would be committed to the Indispensability Thesis; but he makes no such claim.

To take another example: Samuel Guttenplan regards it as wrong to take “paraphrasing X” to be more or less equivalent to “saying what X tells us or means.”²⁸ You can say what a photograph tells us, but you cannot paraphrase one. Rather, citing the *OED*, Guttenplan stresses that ‘a paraphrase is a “re-statement of the sense of a passage in other words.”’²⁹ Since it is a re-statement of a thought in *other* words than those in which the original expressed the thought, one can only paraphrase something that expressed a thought in words in the first place. And ‘since a photograph, whatever it tells us, is not itself in words, it is inappropriate to paraphrase it’.³⁰

On Guttenplan’s view, metaphors similarly do not express thoughts *in* words. Rather, ‘it is words in the metaphor that call on ... [an] object’, and it is what Guttenplan calls ‘the “proto-predicate”, object included, which conveys a message, not the words themselves’.³¹ The burden of Guttenplan’s theory of metaphor is to explain these ideas and to show how speakers can use objects

in this way. It is unnecessary to enter into the details of it here. The point is that he draws from his theory the moral that, as in the case of photographs, 'it would be bizarre to ask someone to express this same information *in other words*. ... Since the speaker is using an object, not words, to convey a message, it makes no sense even to try to paraphrase a metaphor in the strict sense of the term'.³²

It would follow from the truth of Guttenplan's theory that metaphors cannot be paraphrased in the sense he identifies. But here too, it would not follow that metaphor is indispensable. One would need to argue that the thoughts expressed by metaphor could not be expressed without metaphor. Establishing that the thoughts expressed by metaphor are not expressed by the metaphor in words, and therefore that nothing can count as expressing these thoughts in *other words*, does not show this.

It sometimes goes unrecognized that the impossibility of paraphrase does not entail the indispensability of metaphor for communication or expression.

Camp, for instance, holds that a paraphrase of a metaphor must state only 'the content of the speaker's intended illocutionary act' and therefore 'should not ... include contents the speaker merely insinuated, or merely caused her hearer to entertain'.³³ Moreover, in a paraphrase the content is stated 'in a literal and explicit fashion': that is, the paraphrase 'should enable an otherwise linguistically competent speaker to understand the original utterance's content simply in virtue of understanding the meanings of the paraphrasing sentence's constituent terms and their mode of combination'.³⁴

She defends the idea that certain metaphors cannot be paraphrased (at least in certain circumstances) by arguing that various plausible candidates fail to meet the criteria she sets for paraphrase. But if these arguments succeed in showing that such metaphors cannot be paraphrased in her sense, they still do not establish the Indispensability Thesis. To establish that, one must establish that we do something with metaphor that we cannot do without metaphor. Camp's arguments show, at most, that in many circumstances we communicate with metaphor something we cannot communicate by making a statement meeting the criteria she sets for being a paraphrase. Camp, however, takes her argument to establish the stronger view that we sometimes cannot communicate certain contents without metaphor.

She considers this example:

(7) When he finally walked out the door, I was left standing on the top of an icy mountain crag, with nothing around me but thin cold air, bare white cliffs, and a blindingly clear blue sky.

'Here', she says, 'the speaker is claiming to have experienced a specific property, one for which the language has no existing expression, and one which the hearer has not (let us suppose) experienced himself'.³⁵ Now, in this situation, Camp grants that 'the speaker herself is still not forced to *speak* metaphorically'.³⁶ The speaker could have said:

(7₂) I felt an emotion which was like the way it would feel physically to stand on top of an icy mountain crag ...

Statements like these, however, 'still rely at least implicitly on the original metaphor, and so they fail to provide explicit formulations of the speaker's meaning':

if 'like' expresses a substantive relation which holds just in case a particular, contextually salient similarity holds between the two objects ... then (7₂) implicitly builds those similarities into its content. It may then succeed in capturing the speaker's intended content, but it arguably also fails to be fully explicit, in much the way that 'He's ready' fails to specify its implicit argument.³⁷

But this does not show that (7₂) 'relies at least implicitly on the original metaphor'. It shows, at most, that (7₂) fails to meet the requirement that a paraphrase must state the content of the metaphor-user's intended illocutionary act explicitly. It would therefore fail to be a paraphrase, in Camp's sense. But for all Camp says here, using (7₂), in this context, communicates the content of the metaphor-user's intended illocutionary act implicitly. Communicating this content implicitly is different from implicitly relying on a metaphor that communicates the same content.

She also considers

(7₃) I experienced an emotion which is like the physical feeling of standing on an icy mountain crag ... in respects *i, j, k* ...

The problem with this is that,

construed as a paraphrase, (7₃) attributes unintended content to the speaker. In uttering (7), the speaker isn't making any claims about what icy mountain crags are like or about their relation to her

emotional state – she’s just characterizing her emotion, using shared attitudes about icy mountain crags to do so. Her intended claim has the form: ‘When he left, I felt *that way*’. . . . These facts [about crags] may be part of the implicit background conditions which enable the speaker to employ this metaphor as a vehicle for communicating that content, but they aren’t actually part of that content itself.³⁸

(7₃), in short, violates the requirement that a paraphrase must state *only* the content of the speaker’s intended illocutionary act.

Again, this may show that (7₃) fails to be a paraphrase. It does not show that by using (7₃) we would fail to communicate what the metaphor does. Nor does it show, more generally, that if we stated (or otherwise relied on) the background conditions enabling the metaphor to communicate what it does, we could not then communicate the same content without using metaphor. For all Camp shows, we can rely on the same background conditions as the metaphor without relying on the metaphor itself.³⁹

These would not be problems if Camp wanted to establish only that there are unparaphrasable metaphors. But she wants also to establish that there are indispensable metaphors. Camp holds that metaphor is needed for successful communication in situations like that in which she imagines (7) being used: ones in which the language lacks an expression for the property the metaphor-user has in mind, and in which the hearer has not experienced the property (which, she says, prevents the speaker using any demonstrative that would enable the hearer to identify the property). She takes the impossibility of paraphrase in these situations to show that, ‘even if she avails

herself of all possible literal means' of coining a word for the property, the speaker

could not introduce that word into the language, because her hearer would be in no position to comprehend it – not as a result of linguistic incompetence, or irrationality, but just from a lack of worldly experience. ... It is of course true that after the speaker has gotten her hearer to identify the relevant property by metaphorical means, she can then introduce a new term which denotes it. ... But because the metaphor here plays an essential role in defining the new term, this possibility cannot be used to show that metaphor in general is theoretically eliminable. Although each particular metaphor can eventually be eliminated, the situation exemplified by (7) can always arise anew for a different property.⁴⁰

But as I have argued, nothing Camp says about paraphrase shows that *all possible literal means* will fail to enable the hearer to identify the relevant property, even in the situation exemplified by (7). She shows at most that her candidate paraphrases fail to be paraphrases, not that they fail to enable the hearer to identify the relevant property without relying implicitly on the metaphor. And if she does not establish that metaphor is essential for communication in this situation, she also does not establish that metaphor plays an essential role in defining a new term for the property.

What implies the truth of the Indispensability Thesis, then, is not the thesis that metaphors cannot be paraphrased. It is the claim (i) that metaphors do communicate or express something, and the claim (ii) that there is *no* non-

metaphorical way of communicating or expressing what the metaphor does. Of course, if paraphrase *just is* the expression by non-metaphorical means of what the metaphor expresses, or the communication by non-metaphorical means of what the metaphor communicates, then the impossibility of paraphrase plus claim (i) together imply the truth of the Indispensability Thesis. But it is important to recognize that that is what paraphrase must be in order for the denial of the possibility of paraphrase and claim (i) to imply the truth of the Indispensability Thesis. And it is, as we have seen, not universally acknowledged that this is what a paraphrase is.

Finally, there is the question of the value of metaphor. Nothing I have said casts any doubt on the idea that some metaphors express what they do more beautifully, powerfully, or succinctly than any other form of words could. That view, being one about the manner in which metaphors express what they do, is distinct from the Indispensability Thesis. Many writers seem to hold that they must defend the Indispensability Thesis in order to defend the claim that metaphor is of great value. If metaphor is one among several possible ways of communicating or expressing what it does, then (the assumption seems to be) it is of minor importance. Scruton insists that metaphors are indispensable 'not merely because they are part of some unique literary experience',⁴¹ and Black stresses that metaphor provides more than 'the incidental pleasures of stating figuratively what might just as well have been said literally'.⁴²

Such impatience with the idea that great metaphors are valuable 'merely' because of their power, beauty, vividness, and so forth is curious.

Pointing out that a piece of writing is an imaginative, beautiful, vigorous, clear and concise way of communicating something, as many metaphors are, is normally sufficient to show that it is a very valuable way of communicating. If someone were to show that there is a dull, laboured and rambling way of communicating the same thing, we would not conclude that the original way of putting things is of little value. We would certainly not conclude that what we communicated 'might just as well have been said' in the dull way. Perhaps it is because philosophers are so often concerned with questions of truth and knowledge that they are inclined to defend metaphor by arguing that it is essential for the expression or discovery of certain truths.

VI

I have not, of course, demonstrated that the Indispensability Thesis is false. Rather, I have shown that various arguments for it do not succeed, and I have distinguished it from a variety of claims with which it is easily confused. As I said at the beginning, however, many philosophers do not even attempt to argue for the Indispensability Thesis. They simply assert that metaphors are indispensable. This being so, it may be that some will respond to my discussion so far in the following way: perhaps these arguments do fail, but is it not *obvious* that some metaphors are indispensable? Arguments for the Indispensability Thesis, it may be felt, are unnecessary. Metaphors come in a dazzling variety of forms apart from the simple 'X is Y' form. Not only predicates, but nouns and adjectives outside predicates can be used metaphorically. Consider complex poetic metaphors such as:

Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.⁴³

... selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, thoughts against
thoughts in groans grind.⁴⁴

There is shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.⁴⁵

Is it not obvious that we could not express what these express in any other way?

I have not shown that these philosophers are wrong. What I hope to have shown is that asking rhetorical questions like this is not good enough. Advocates of the Indispensability Thesis *do* need to provide arguments for it. If the arguments that *are* given for it so often turn out to be based on confusion, we have reason to be suspicious of our sense (if we have it) that very apt, striking, or complex metaphors are indispensable for the purposes claimed by advocates of the Indispensability Thesis. I have so far provided six grounds for suspicion.

First, I have shown that the indispensability of a concept of something in terms of which metaphor is explained (e.g., the concept of a game of make-believe) is sometimes confused with the indispensability of metaphor itself. Second, the indispensability of the concept *applied* metaphorically is often confused with the indispensability of metaphor itself. Third, the fact that we happen to lack expressions with which to attribute a certain property non-metaphorically, and the fact that we can attribute it with metaphor, would not by themselves establish an interesting version of the Indispensability Thesis. Fourth, the fact that we use some metaphors to ϕ in a *manner* in which we could not ϕ without metaphor would not show that they are indispensable for ϕ -ing. Fifth, the unparaphrasability of metaphor is sometimes confused with the indispensability of metaphor. Sixth, the fact that some metaphors are tremendously valuable ways of communicating and expressing things is consistent with the claim that they are dispensable for these purposes.

In short, supporters of the thesis need to argue for it because they need to show that they are avoiding these common confusions. It is not simply *obvious* that certain metaphors are indispensable, because it is not simply obvious that our sense of the indispensability of certain metaphors is not due to one of these confusions. Argument is required to show this.

There is also a more general ground for suspicion. As we have seen, metaphors are indispensable for communication or expression only if they do communicate or express something. In addition, to *know* that a given metaphor is indispensable, we need to know what it expresses. If you do not

know what a given metaphor expresses, you cannot claim that what it expresses could not be expressed without metaphor.

This consideration shows that not just any complex or poetic metaphor can be used as evidence for the Indispensability Thesis. It must be one that we understand: we must know what it expresses. But many difficult metaphors are difficult precisely because it is unclear what they express. Philosophers often write as though we find difficult metaphors puzzling only because we find it hard to put them into other words. In fact, we often puzzle over difficult poetic metaphors because we are unsure what they are expressing. Take Eliot's metaphor, 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust'. Perhaps some people know what this expresses. But I expect that for many of us it is not clear. This does not mean we have no suspicion about what it expresses; and we do know, of certain thoughts, that the metaphor is definitely not expressing them. We may know what kind of subject-matter it is expressing something about. But all of this is consistent with not knowing what it does express. And if we do not know what it expresses, then we do not know that it expresses something inexpressible without metaphor.

Suppose, then, that we have examples of metaphors that express something, and we do know what they express, and they seem indispensable. There is a seventh reason why we need an argument for their indispensability.

If metaphors express or communicate anything, then presumably they characterize something. Whether a predicate, an adjective, or a noun is used metaphorically, what it is applied to is characterized by the metaphor. This

being so, the metaphor must characterize it as having some property or properties.⁴⁶ You cannot characterize anything without characterizing it as having some property.

If we know what the metaphor expresses, as we must if we know that it is indispensable, then we know what property or properties it characterizes something as having. We can identify the property. Given these facts, a tempting but naïve way of criticizing the Indispensability Thesis would be to say this: if you can identify a property, then you can coin a non-metaphorical term for it – a name for it or a predicate or an adjective with which we can characterize something as having it. To think otherwise is comparable to thinking that there are particulars that we can identify but cannot name. Consequently, any metaphor that expresses something and is understood is dispensable: for any such metaphor characterizes something as having a property which we can identify, and any such property is one that we can characterize something as having with purely non-metaphorical terms.

I call this response naïve because it overlooks the possibility that we sometimes need metaphor in order to identify certain properties in the first place, or to enable others to identify them. To my knowledge, no advocate of indispensability does explicitly and directly claim that there are properties such that, even when we have identified them, we cannot then name them or coin a predicate or adjective with which to characterize something as having them. Camp shows a greater awareness of this problem than many. She is careful to claim only that we sometimes need metaphor in order to identify a

property or to enable others to do so. As we have seen, however, her arguments do not establish this.

So this is a seventh reason why advocates of the thesis must provide arguments for it. It is very implausible that we cannot coin a non-metaphorical term for a property once we have identified it. If any metaphors are nevertheless indispensable for communication or expression, they must be needed (either by the metaphor-user or her reader) in order to identify the properties that they are used to characterize something as having. It is not simply obvious that they are needed for this, and so it is not simply obvious that metaphors are indispensable.

None of this demonstrates that the Indispensability Thesis is false. Its prospects, however, do not look good.⁴⁷

Notes

¹ Stephen Yablo, 'How in the World?', *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1997), pp. 255-287; Stephen Yablo, 'Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume LXXII* (1998), pp. 229-261.

² See Kendall L. Walton, 'Metaphor and Prop Oriented Make-Believe', *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1993), pp. 39-56.

³ Yablo, 'Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?', p. 246.

⁴ Yablo, 'How in the World?', p. 279.

⁵ Yablo, 'Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?', p. 249.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁷ Apart, that is, from a principle of the form exemplified by: ‘the worlds in which the clouds are such that it would be natural and proper to regard them as angry if one were going to attribute emotions to clouds’.

⁸ Moreover, this is not a principle of the kinds Yablo mentions, such as ‘They are the worlds that make “Italy is a boot” fictional’ or ‘They are the worlds in which it would be natural and proper to regard Italy as a boot if one were going to characterize nations as items of clothing’. The fact that Italy is suitable for use as a boot-prop is, rather, one thing that can *make* it natural and proper to regard Italy as a boot, or make the sentence fictional.

⁹ Indeed, *looking like something angry* is itself a multiply realizable property. It may be that we sometimes attribute to clouds certain properties that *realize* the property of looking like something angry, and that we attribute different realizing properties in different cases.

¹⁰ Yablo, ‘Does Ontology Rest on a Mistake?’, pp. 253-254.

¹¹ Berys Gaut, ‘Metaphor and the Understanding of Art’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 97 (1997), pp. 223-241.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Camp, 'Metaphor and That Certain "Je Ne Sais Quoi"', *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 129, no. 1 (2006), p. 17.

¹⁶ Richard Boyd, 'Metaphor and Theory Change: What is "Metaphor" a Metaphor For?' in Andrew Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993), pp. 481-532.

¹⁷ Camp, 'Metaphor and That Certain "Je Ne Sais Quoi"', pp. 17-18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ By contrast, I do not know whether we *need* the concept of being alive with movement in order to classify together the properties the metaphor enables us to classify together in Gaut's other example. My point above is only that we do not need metaphor to do so.

²¹ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1997), p. 91.

²² Frank Sibley, 'Tastes, Smells, and Aesthetics', in John Benson, Betty Redfern, and Jeremy Roxbee Cox (eds), *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2001), p. 238.

²³ Davidson, for one, thinks that 'much of what we are caused to notice [by metaphor] is not propositional in character' ('What Metaphors Mean', in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1984), p. 263). I omit mentioning this alternative in what follows for the sake of brevity, but the argument still goes through *mutatis mutandis* if Davidson is right about metaphor.

²⁴ Cf. Max Black, 'Metaphor', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 55 (1954-1955), pp. 280ff, and his 'More about Metaphor', *Dialectica*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1977), p. 439.

²⁵ Black, 'Metaphor', p. 293.

²⁶ In fact, this too might be doubted. This version of the Indispensability Thesis actually implies only that some metaphors cannot be paraphrased *without metaphor*. Only if a paraphrase cannot itself be a metaphor does this version of the Indispensability Thesis imply that metaphors cannot be paraphrased.

²⁷ Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean', pp. 246, 262.

²⁸ Samuel Guttenplan, *Objects of Metaphor* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2005), p. 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Camp, 'Metaphor and That Certain "Je Ne Sais Quoi"', p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

³⁹ Similarly, Camp rejects other candidate paraphrases on the grounds that, contrary to her second requirement for paraphrase, 'an otherwise linguistically competent, rational hearer could no longer understand the paraphrasing sentence simply in virtue of his basic linguistic competence and rationality. ... he would need to engage in just the sort of interpretation called for by the original metaphor' ('Metaphor and That Certain "Je Ne Sais Quoi"', p. 14). But that does not mean the hearer could not understand the sentence at all. And the fact that a hearer would need to engage in the same sort of interpretation demanded by the metaphor to understand the speaker does not show that the speaker would need to rely on the metaphor to be understood by the hearer.

⁴⁰ Camp, 'Metaphor and That Certain "Je Ne Sais Quoi"', pp. 15, 16.

⁴¹ Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, p. 91.

⁴² Black, 'More about Metaphor', p. 441. See also Black, 'Metaphor', p. 293.

⁴³ Ecclesiastes 11:1 (King James Version).

⁴⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves', in Catherine Phillips (ed.), *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2002), p. 175, l. 14.

⁴⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in his *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 63-64, ll. 25-30.

⁴⁶ Or as standing in some relation, if this is not a property; I ignore this for the sake of simplicity here.

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Martá Abrusán, Malcolm Budd, Rafael de Clercq, John Hawthorne, John Hyman, Anna Kemp, Sam Liao, Andrew McGonigal, Severin Schroeder, Ralph Walker, and two anonymous referees from the *British Journal of Aesthetics* for their comments. I have benefited from discussions of versions of this paper presented at the Oxford Philosophy Graduate Conference in 2009 and at the American Society for Aesthetics 2010 Pacific Division Annual Meeting. I thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding my research.