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# Metaphors in philosophical explanation

*Handle with care*

Brueghel, Dutch Proverbs on <https://www.literatuurgeschiedenis.nl/middeleeuwen/spreekwoorden.html>

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It is December 2019. In a parallel universe, the Open Philosophy® Council is in session. Most of the day has been spent discussing Global Administration. Decisions have been made on such momentous issues as the correct procedure for giving out honorary degrees, a ban on unauthorised philosophical journals and a code of conduct for the academic teaching of philosophy.

There is only one item left on the agenda. An application for an extension of the Open Philosophy® Toolkit. The Chairman turns to the Council's Secretary. "Can't you come up with a reason to throw this thing out?" he whispers. "I have a feeling this is going to be heavily disputed, and I'd like to go home. I have an excellent Burgundy waiting for me. I don't fancy listening to yet another heated debate going nowhere."

The Secretary mournfully shakes his head. "I am afraid not," he says. "The form is properly filled out, and the applicant is here to answer any questions. Over there, that dumpling of a woman in the maroon dress. Goes by the name of Majofski. Even looks the part, a bit Eastern European, with those flat cheekbones. Probably works as a librarian somewhere. You know the type. Could not get an academic posting but fancies herself as a bit of a philosopher. Better get it over and done with, otherwise she'll be dogging our doorstep for weeks."

The Chairman sighs. "Give us the form then," he says, and proceeds to read it out to the assembled philosophers who are lounging about in their leather chairs.

*Proposed extension: a testing device for metaphors.*

*Format (s): Thought experiment and/or empirical testing and/or computer testing*

*Rationale: Metaphors can have powerful but unpredictable effects. Philosophers use metaphors for explaining and teaching. If a metaphor goes astray, this is may be harmful to both the philosopher and the audience, or even society at large. Therefore, the Open Philosophy® Toolkit should include a method a metaphor may be tested by.*

*Academic grounding: ...*

"oh dear, this stuff goes on for pages and pages. Very pretenti-, eh, erudite looking. I see lots of names and many footnotes, well, I suppose everyone has read it. Who has an opinion about this?"

A smallish man with a large nose puts up his hand. He has a fanatical look about him. "There we go," the Chairman thinks. "Now we are in for it." He smiles benignly. "Yes? Please introduce yourself."

"I am Michael Locke," the large nosed man says. "Yes, related to. And it is on his behalf that I must speak up. John was very clear on this matter. 'Do not use metaphors,' he said.

‘They are lying cheats<sup>1</sup>.’ He scratches his nose. “John meant that they are not suited for truth. Or anything else important. And that goes for any kind of figurative language. The other empiricists thought so too. Hobbes<sup>2</sup>. Berkeley<sup>3</sup>. All against metaphors. A waste of space they are. So is this testing device. If you don’t use metaphors, you don’t need to test them either. End of story. Right as rain. That’s not a metaphor by the way. Nobody knows what it means.”

“Any kind of figurative language?” the Chairman asks. “I thought we were only talking about metaphors. Mrs Majofski? Could you enlighten us?”

The little round woman stands. “Call me Anna, please,” she says. “Yes, I did mean metaphors, but in a very broad sense. You know the word *metaphor* is a metaphor<sup>4</sup> in itself? It is when we refer to one thing through something else that is a bit but not quite like it. You can build a metaphor from a few words. As in *you are my knight in shining armour*.” She beams at the Chairman who looks embarrassed.

“But you can also build metaphors from expressions or whole sentences. So even stories can be metaphors. You don’t have to restrict yourself to words either. A painting or a video can be a metaphor. Or a political cartoon”.

A snort comes from one corner of the room. “That is **not** how Aristotle defined metaphors. Do you think, Madam, that it is up to you to decide what a metaphor is? Do you have the power to make words mean different things<sup>5</sup>?”

The little round woman colours visibly. “I did not think all of that up myself. You can ask Dr Hills here. He is the expert.”

“David, my dear fellow,” the Chairman says. “So glad that you are here. Can you confirm what this good lady is saying?”

Hills strokes his beard. “I suppose,” he says slowly, “she is a bit plain spoken, but she is not wrong. I think she must have read my article<sup>6</sup> in the Stanford Encyclopaedia. As she says, a metaphor refers to something in terms of something else. What is important for the present discussion is this: the likening is done without specifying exactly what

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<sup>1</sup> “All the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats” - Locke, 1998, p. 677

<sup>2</sup> According to Thomas Hobbes, it is one of the abuses of language to “use words metaphorically; that is, in other sense than that they are ordained for; and thereby deceive others” - Hobbes & Gaskin, 1998, p. 21

<sup>3</sup> George Berkeley simply said that “the philosopher should abstain from metaphor” - Berkeley, 2012, p. 74

<sup>4</sup> The word ‘metaphor’ comes from the Greek μεταφορά: to transfer, to carry across.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Carroll, 1982, p. 191

<sup>6</sup> Hills, 2017

qualities or features are relevant. That is a large part of what makes a metaphor unpredictable.”

He sighs heavily. “I know it is customary to consult Aristotle on metaphors as he had opinions about them<sup>7</sup>. But his idea of metaphor was restricted to fancy word play with what he called ‘hidden comparisons’. You know, as in *Aristotle is a lion*. But if you look at what a metaphor does, you quickly realise that metaphors can be of all shapes and sizes. Think of Aesop’s tales and the parables<sup>8</sup> from the new Testament. These are narrated metaphors<sup>9</sup>, helping us to solve essential psychological and social problems in the real world. Myths, fables, allegories and children’s tales are the same<sup>10</sup>. It does not matter what label you stick on the various forms. Daniel here would agree that his thought experiments are also metaphors.”

Dennett looks up. “Of course, my thought experiments are metaphors. I sometimes call them intuition pumps, but that is only when I want to be obnoxious.” He pokes Searle in the ribs. “Seriously, I regard thought experiments as the philosophers’ version of Aesop’s fables<sup>11</sup>. They are little stories to provoke a heart-felt, table-thumping intuition. I love them. How did I put it? These are the enduring melodies of philosophy, with the staying power that ensures that students will remember them, quite vividly and accurately, years after they have forgotten the intricate surrounding arguments and analysis.”

A commotion issues from the back. A big man in a brown suit is on his feet, gesticulating. His round brown eyes flash. His little brown beard tries to jump up and down. “But what about science, sir?” he cries. “Surely you don’t mean to suggest that thought experiments are just metaphors? That they cannot be scientific? That philosophers cannot perceive the laws of nature?”

Dennett is visibly taken aback and looks helplessly at the Chairman. “That is James Robert Brown,” the Secretary whispers. “A Canadian. He has recently co-edited a monster volume on Thought Experiments<sup>12</sup>. Tread carefully.”

The Chairman beams his special beatific smile. “I am sure Daniel meant nothing of the kind, my good man. You must not take these things so personally. No one here is trying to suggest that philosophy is inferior to science. Right, Daniel?”

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<sup>7</sup> Aristotle said: “The greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor; it is the one thing that cannot be learnt from others; and it is also a sign of genius” (Aristotle, 1984, pp. 2334–2335, section on Poetics).

<sup>8</sup> Harari, 2018, chapter the Tree of Knowledge

<sup>9</sup> Mah, 2014, p. 9

<sup>10</sup> Geary, 2011. chapter Metaphor and Parables and Proverbs

<sup>11</sup> D. C. Dennett, 2013, p. 6

<sup>12</sup> Stuart, Fehige, & Brown, 2017

Dennett bows to the Chairman's in obvious gratitude. "Not at all," he says carefully, "I don't pretend that my own thought experiments rival with empirical experiments. However, that is not to say it could not happen. Or that a thought experiment could not take the form of a formal logical argument<sup>13</sup>. But most thought experiments are simply intuition pumps. Like Plato's Cave and Descartes' Demon. Intuition pumps are the hand tools of the mind, so to speak. Not the precise, systematic machines of mathematics and science. Not intended to be analysed through rigorous argument."

Brown relaxes back into his chair. Dennett doesn't. He is obviously on a roll. "Such fun too! Thought up dozens myself." He spreads his arms. "Every philosopher should create their own. That is why they are in the Open Philosophy® Toolkit<sup>14</sup>. Although it beats me why Baggini and Fosl put in *analogies* and *intuition pumps* and *thought experiments* as separate entries. Truth be told, the difference is merely semantic. They amount to the same thing. I would urge you to take a more practical view."

"Then can you explain to us, Daniel, how metaphors work?" the Chairman asks. Dennett looks nonplussed. "What do you mean, how do they work? I am not a philosopher of language. I haven't got a clue. Ask someone else." He sinks back in his chair and starts leafing through a coffee stained manual on object-oriented programming.

Hills clears his throat. "I would advise against that, Chairman. Unless you enjoy listening to a cacophony of dissenting voices. If you like, I could give you a quick run-down. The well-worn semantic account, the Gricean pragmatic account, the comparativist view, Davidson's brute force account<sup>15</sup>. The literalist versus the contextualist. There are dazzling insights from cognitive linguistics who have done away with referents and propositional content and logical forms. And there is my personal favourite: metaphors as a game of make believe<sup>16</sup>."

"No, thank you, David," the Chairman says firmly. "Just answer me this. Is there a received view on how the construction of the metaphor is related to its meaning?"

Hills takes off his glasses and starts to polish them. "No, Chairman," he says. "And there won't be anytime soon. The old ideas in the Philosophy of Language are, well, old. A tad arrogant at times. And the new ones are too new. And much too complicated. Just picking up one of Brandom's books will probably put your back out. He plays Wittgenstein's

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<sup>13</sup> Baggini & Fosl, 2002, p. 58

<sup>14</sup> Baggini & Fosl, 2002

<sup>15</sup> Davidson, 1978, pp. 46-47

<sup>16</sup> Hills, 2017, p. 65, citing Kendall Walton, 1993

language game but in multiple dimensions, styling himself on Kant, of all people. With a pragmatic **and** a normative twist<sup>17</sup>. You don't want to know.

"Indeed," the Chairman concurs. "I do not. I thank you for your, eh, explication. Let me recapitulate. As I understand, a metaphor likens something to something else that is a bit but not quite like it. In any form or shape. And we don't know how it works. Somehow it fills our heads with ideas, but we don't know quite what they are<sup>18</sup>. Correct?" Hills nods.

"So," the Chairman continues, "Mrs Majofski, I mean Anna, did not make any glaring errors on her application form after all. I thank you folks to keep your huffing and puffing to yourself from now on. But what are we to make of the ban on metaphors by our great British empiricists? Are we to honour that ban? Any thoughts?"

"I thought you'd never ask," a deep voice breaks in. "I mean, if anyone in this room knows about metaphors in real life, it's me."

"Come up here, George," the Chairman says, "we can't hear what you have to say if you keep mumbling into your beard." Privately he wonders why there seems to be an overabundance of men with beards in philosophy. He prefers to be clean shaven himself. Surely women must feel, well, conspicuous, in such hairy company. He makes a note to himself. Not a topic for today. This day has already gone on too long.

Lakoff ambles up to the top of the room. He is wearing a long coat which still glistens with rain. "Excuse my attire," he says, shaking himself out. "I have been interviewing. Out there. Very important to keep in touch with real people, you know. You should try it occasionally." Some philosophers pointedly stare out of the window.

"I suppose you have been reading my books<sup>19</sup>," he says. "Have you?" There is an awkward silence. He grimaces. "Well, I suppose I can tell you the gist of it. We all use metaphors all the time. About 5 or 6 a minute. Usually we are not even aware of it. That's why this journalist, Geary<sup>20</sup>, likens them to volcanoes. Which is quite apt. Dead metaphors you would have to look up in an etymological dictionary. Nobody does that except our Chairman here."

He winks at the Chairman who pretends not to see. "The common ones, we all know as clichés," he continues. "You know, *happy as a lark* and *bright as a penny*. The active metaphors, the fresh ones, those are the ones that you notice".

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<sup>17</sup> Loeffler, 2018

<sup>18</sup> Lewis Carroll, 1982, p. 136

<sup>19</sup> Lakoff & Johnson, 2003

<sup>20</sup> Geary, 2011

“Aha,” says the Chairman. He perks up. “That is a nice distinction. I suppose the active metaphors are the important ones. Since we don’t really notice the others?”

Lakoff looks at the Chairman as if he were a toddler spilling orange juice across the new white carpet. “No Chairman,” he says slowly. “If things were that simple, I would not have to write books about it.” He takes off his coat and sits down heavily.

“Metaphors are primarily a matter of thought and only secondary of language. That is why many philosophers of language get confused around metaphors. We use metaphors to explain abstract concepts to ourselves and to others. Even Locke, with his disdain for metaphors, used them. As did Hobbes<sup>21</sup>. We build metaphors initially from sensory information, that is, information that is readily available to our bodies. Over the course of thousands and thousands of years, we have created many webs of interdependent and intersecting metaphors. That is why our language is full of them. Fascinating, from a historical point of view. ‘Without metaphor, there would be no philosophy,’ my friend Mark Johnson likes to say<sup>22</sup>. But there is a catch.”

He pauses and looks around. A few philosophers sit up a little straighter and Lakoff looks gratified. He continues. “These metaphors, that we have shaped with our thoughts, in turn shape our thinking. Some of you will feel uncomfortable with me saying this, I am sure. Particularly if you fancy yourself as a writer. Or if you are so full of admiration for the Grand Masters of Philosophy that you think that their instrument, the pen, must be the ultimate instrument of philosophy. Well, if you think that, you are wrong. Language evolved for rather different reasons.”

He grins. Would you believe, our close relatives, the chimpanzees already have a capacity for spatial metaphors<sup>23</sup>? Related to their social hierarchy. So, metaphors may even predate language. But I digress.” He looks at his watch which appears to have stopped.

“Do come to the point, George,” says the Chairman. “I am sure you did not come here for the sole purpose of treading on some toes. You mentioned a catch?”

Lakoff nods. “There are several catches. One is that we cannot understand what our mind cannot embody. He looks around and spots the dark and brooding figure of Di Paolo. His white beard is luminescent. “Ezequiel, perhaps you’d better explain about embodied and enactive minds? Since you base your theory partly on Jonas<sup>24</sup>, our more, eh, continentally

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<sup>21</sup> Forrester, 2010

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, 2008

<sup>23</sup> Dahl & Adachi, 2013

<sup>24</sup> Di Paolo, 2005; Cuffari, Di Paolo, & De Jaegher, 2015

oriented colleagues may appreciate your revolutionary ideas about how mind and language came to be.”

The Chairman does not miss a beat. “No, Ezequiel, you had better not. We all know what a prolific writer you are. Now is not the time. Pray continue, George. We are hanging on your every word.” Di Paolo sinks back in his chair, grabs his pipe and starts to fill it. He looks unhappy.

“Ok, ok,” Lakoff mutters. “For present purposes, the important point is that metaphors guide our unconscious, and in doing so, shape our ideas and opinions. There is a wealth of research from cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology which demonstrates this<sup>25</sup>. In addition to my own research, of course. And there can be real-life consequences. Take an expression like *fighting disease*, which casts disease as an enemy. This metaphor actually reduces people’s willingness to curb their own risky behaviour<sup>26</sup>. Something similar happened around Richard Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene*<sup>27</sup>. That metaphor had such sticking power that it held back research into non-genetic carriers of evolution for quite a while.”

“I remember it well,” Dennett says. He puts his cup down on the book he has been reading. “Richard was quite upset about it. In retrospect he said he should have called it *The Immortal Gene*. This is one of the reasons why I have suggested that metaphors should be reverse-engineered before you let them loose into the world. Find out any hidden meanings. Make sure it does what you want it to do. Searle here wished he had reverse-engineered his *Chinese Room*.”

Searle grimaces but says nothing. He has been very quiet. Too much media attention, Chairman thinks. Perhaps growing a beard would help. He waves Lakoff on. “Anything else, George?”

“Well,” Lakoff says, “to come back to your remark about dead metaphors, Chairman. It does not matter whether we consciously recognise a metaphor or not. I will give you an example: the verb *to comprehend*. As you well know, it comes from the Latin *comprehendere*, meaning *to seize* or *to grasp* (*prehendere*) *together* (*com*). As a metaphor, the word *comprehension* is dead as a doornail. Yet we still understand *understanding* as a kind of mental grasping. This is not merely a matter of a single word. We have expressions such as *get a handle on the idea*, or *the idea got away from me*, or *eluded me*, *catching* or *escaping the*

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<sup>25</sup> Gibbs Jr., 2017, Gibbs Jr., 2008

<sup>26</sup> Hauser & Schwarz, 2015

<sup>27</sup> Dawkins, 1976



*subtleties of the argument*. These are all instances of the same *understanding = grasping* metaphor which is very much alive in our language today<sup>28</sup>.

“If I understand you correctly,” the Chairman says, “there is more to the metaphor than its parts”.

“Quite so,” Lakoff agrees. “We have layered common metaphors into stories that culturally define us. Take conceptual metaphors such as *wellbeing = wealth*, *purposes = destinations*, *strength = moral virtue* and *time = money*. This is not only how we speak; this is how we think.”

He gestures to Mrs Majofski. “The point this lady is trying to make, I think, is that if you want to find out how a metaphor is going to be understood in the world, you need to put some elbow grease in. For instance, by reverse engineering it, like Daniel here suggests. But frankly, I don’t think that is going to be enough. Arm-chair analysis will still limit you to your own cognitive predispositions. You need to become aware of all manner of cognitive biases that are built into us through our perceptions. The best thing for it is to go out and test your metaphors on real people and see how they understand them. You might learn something too.”

“Is that what you meant, Anna?” the chairman asks. She nods vehemently. “Did you also mean to say that some of the entries in the Open Philosophy® Toolkit should be revised, as Daniel here suggests?”

She nods again, then adds: “Including the entry on *useful fictions*. Such a strange paragraph. It also speaks of *the selfish gene*, the one you were on about before. It defines *useful fiction* as a subspecies of *thought experiments*. It even devotes a paragraph entitled *caution* to its perilous nature. She wrinkles her nose. “It is all so very confusing. Those entries in the Open Philosophy® Toolkit on *analogies*, *thought experiments*, *intuition pumps* and *useful fiction* – they all refer back to each other. *Metaphors* are mentioned but not defined. *Intuition pumps* are, but in a round-about way: that they are not called *metaphors* or *analogies* ‘for reasons of its origin’. That ‘origin’ being Professor Dennett here.”

Dennett is engrossed in his manual. He does not seem to hear her.

“Now that I have started,” Anna says defiantly, “I might as well finish. The Open Philosophy® Toolkit also distinguishes between *weak* and *strong analogies*. Do you know what the criterium is for a *strong analogy*? Don’t laugh. ‘A large or decisive number of relevant differences.’ What does that even mean?”

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<sup>28</sup> Lakoff, 1987

“Why the Dickens did you not say all this before, woman?” the Chairman bursts out.

She colours a deep bright red. “Because it seemed impolite,” she stammers. “I only meant to offer something useful to those philosophers who wanted it, not to be critical of all these big names.

She hesitates, then continues. “Excuse me for saying this, but this Council seems to think that talking amongst themselves counts as communication. Perhaps I had better take my notions over to the faculty of Media & Communication Studies. I mean, it is not just philosophers that should test their metaphors.”

Several philosophers veer up and protest. The Secretary touches the Chairman’s hand in what seems to be a desperate gesture. “You must not let that happen,” he whispers urgently. “Before you know it, the public will start to hold us philosophers responsible for the effects of our writings. Imagine. As we are largely unaware what metaphors are hidden inside our texts, we would have to test all of them. Impossible! And even if we managed that, we still could not predict the effects on a future audience. We would have to take out insurance. You **must** find a way to put this cat back into the bag”.

“Order, order,” the Chairman cries. The noise dies down.

“Mrs Majofski, I mean, Anna, you have given us something to think about. There seems to be some confusion in the Open Philosophical® toolkit as to the nature of metaphoric expression and thought.”

“Confusion, my foot.” Anna has become defiant. “Those four entries in the Open Philosophy® toolkit should be merged into one. The one entry must include metaphors or might even be called *metaphors*. Plus, there should be a new entry for *rigorous argument*, to allow for those special cases of *thought experiments* and *analogies* that are on a par with science or mathematics. Assuming someone will come up with a definition of *rigorous* because currently the toolkit does not contain one.”

She sits down, clearly taken aback by her own vehemence. An angry muttering rises. Some philosophers are leafing frantically through the index of the Open Philosophy® Toolkit. The Chairman makes a soothing gesture as if to quieten a sea.

“Anna, I commend your efforts in attempting to heighten our awareness of the trouble we might unwittingly cause when using metaphors. I personally see no harm in adding a metaphoric testing tool to our array of instruments. After all, you are not suggesting its usage to be compulsory.”

Anna smiles weakly. The muttering rises again. The Chairman looks about. Some philosophers seem very agitated. Brown is tapping his foot. Michael Locke is barely able

to contain himself. He is feeling a bit queasy himself. Should not have had that wonderful apple pie in vanilla sauce at lunch, perhaps. Then his head clears.

“Anna, my dear”, he says. “It occurs to me that we have a bit of a situation here. If I understand you correctly, metaphors are a ubiquitous ingredient of our language. Even part of our pre-linguistic apparatus, I gather. And they keep changing. What we think of as a metaphor today, may be regarded as common speech tomorrow. And have a different meaning the day after. What kind of test or engineering procedure could be applied in the case where the only available word that you possess is a former metaphor turned everyday word?”

Anna is about to answer when Hills rises. “Chairman”, he says formally, “did I not advise you not, I repeat not, to venture into the philosophy of language? I understand your worry, but this is a niche subject”.

Several voices join in. There is loud banging on tables. A chorus of ‘it’s our language too’ erupts. The Secretary frantically waves his fountain pen, ink drops splashing on Dennett’s manual. The Chairman raises his arms as if to invoke the heavens. “Patience, dear friends!” He lowers his voice. “It is patience we need. Let Anna answer this question. That is why we have invited her here today, surely?” From the corner of his eyes he sees Hills stomping out of the room, muttering ‘fools, fools’ to himself<sup>29</sup>.

Anna swallows. “I will do my best”, she says, staring into a sea of expectant faces. “You probably think of words and expressions referring to something in the real world, is that right?” Several philosophers nod.

“Well, as Dr Lakoff suggested earlier, language may not have evolved to convey truths. Or to attribute beliefs. Or even to convey thoughts.” The room is eerily quiet. She takes a deep breath. “You might not like the idea too much, but our intelligence, our way with words, our conceptual abilities, our morality – everything that seems to separate us from animals, may just be a by-product of our linguistic abilities, not its purpose.”

Michael Locke erupts. “What do you mean, not the purpose of our linguistic abilities? Then what, pray, is the purpose of language? Next you will claim that there is no difference between animals and ourselves. John would not have stood for such rubbish. He drew the line at not being cruel to animals.”

Di Paolo seizes his chance. He is on his feet, gripping his pipe as if brandishing a weapon. “There is no difference at all”, he says, “it is all in my books. Language is a form of autopoiesis. Like culture. Like homeostasis at the cellular level. Like evolutionary change. It is all the same, provided of course you accept a rereading of Kant’s notion of natural

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Shakespeare, n.d. King Lear: Act 2, Scene 4

purpose. That bit was Weber & Varela's invention<sup>30</sup>. Mine, or actually, Jonas' addition is that of survival<sup>31</sup>, the mother of all values. The urge to survive is what sets the organism free. Free to become robust and adapt into ever new forms of cooperation with the outside world, eventually becoming, in our case, culture and language. Nothing whatsoever to do with logic or information or thinking. Just active homeostasis. That good Dr Ashby<sup>32</sup> had it all sussed, back in the 1960s."

Dennett is suddenly awake. "Interesting, interesting. Important implications for consciousness. What do you call this, Ezequiel? This theory of yours?" Di Paolo takes a bow. "Autopoietic enactivism at your service," he smiles. He looks much happier. Dennett's eyes twinkle. He has put his manual down and is leaning forward.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen", the Chairman implores, "let's try to stay on topic, please?" He gestures to Anna to continue.

"I will take this in stages", Anna says. "You remember that Wittgenstein said that 'meaning is use'? That the usage of words depends on the game that is being played. Also, that this usage may change depending on the game, and that there is no privileged game<sup>33</sup>. It was the later Wittgenstein who said this, obviously, because the younger Wittgenstein still thought that word and sentences work as names that refer to their bearer. Just like words refer to objects."

Several philosophers look nonplussed. Anna secretly wonders if this might be a belated reaction to Di Paolo's declaration. Or perhaps, that not all philosophers are familiar with Wittgenstein. She drinks from the glass the Secretary has thoughtfully put on the table in front of her and continues.

"Brandom takes the idea that *meaning* is socially determined, several steps further<sup>34</sup>. Language games have rules, and those rules are also socially determined. If we want to understand a concept or a proposition, we grasp, infer its meaning from the way it is socially used. We do this implicitly, or, as Wittgenstein wrote, blindly. And we do this, not to exchange information, says Brandom, but in a game of giving and asking for reasons. To explain and justify ourselves. To position ourselves in a larger web of beliefs that we collectively hold. If we have logical reasons, or rational ones, they must fit into that web of beliefs before we can draw on them. Otherwise, we cannot play the deontic game of

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<sup>30</sup> Weber & Varela, 2002

<sup>31</sup> Froese & Di Paolo, 2011

<sup>32</sup> W. Ashby, 1960

<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein, 1953

<sup>34</sup> Robert Brandom, 1998

scorekeeping. Which is how we keep track of each other's commitments. Of what we mean. It is all normative, you see."

The silence stretches. Eventually the Secretary asks: "Brandom, isn't that the guy with the foot-long beard?"

Dennett chuckles. "Yes", he grins. "A fine beard indeed. Well over a foot, I'd guess. I like the guy. And what he writes, mostly. All in the spirit of Wilfrid Sellars, may his soul find peace. Sellars understood<sup>35</sup> that *to mean* is about prescription and justification, not about description and explanation of empirical facts. So, you lot can talk about the meaning of expressions until the cows come home. It makes no difference. Meaning will go its own way."

The Chairman looks as if he has woken up to discover a bulldozer in his back garden - before being hijacked by a spaceship<sup>36</sup>. "But, but," he objects, "but then how can we make our words mean anything at all? What about truth? And knowledge? And perhaps the answer to ...?" His voice falters.

"Told you so!" Hills has come back into the room. He is triumphant. He points a long white finger at the Chairman. "Happy now? Any the wiser? No, I did not think so. I will summarise it for you, Chairman. Words have meaning in the same way that humans don't."

The Chairman now looks bewildered. At this point Searle wakes from his lethargy. He pushes himself upright and stands with balled fists in front of the assembled philosophers. "What is going to happen to my speech acts?" he cries. "Austin's legacy! Are you throwing away everything I have worked for? You, you, Pragmaticists!" He is almost spitting with rage.

"Mind your heart, John", Hills says. "You were never very good at reading the spirit of the times. An unfortunate habit. But this is not about a French hippie, a brain-in-a-vat or an attractive new assistant. You get to keep your speech acts. It is only the notion of speaker's intention that must come down a notch or two. *Meaning* is not just about the speaker, never mind his intentions. It is about inferencing within the whole social fabric."

Anna coughs pointedly. Searle, Hills, and Dennett stop talking amongst themselves, looking suitably embarrassed. "As I was saying", she continues, "assuming, with Wittgenstein, that *meaning is use*, and, with Brandom, that *use is governed by social norms*, there is no such thing as a fixed semantic meaning, let alone one we can forward engineer. So, you need not worry, Chairman. I have not saddled you with a whole new problem.

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<sup>35</sup> D. Dennett, 2006

<sup>36</sup> Cf. The Hitchhiker's guide to the Galaxy, Adams, 2017.

That larger problem with meaning was already there. You will forgive me for not solving that problem today, I hope?” She bats her eyelashes.

General laughter erupts. Anna visibly relaxes. “Good,” she says, “then I will leave that to Robert Brandom. Is there anything else you wanted to ask me, Chairman? Anyone else?”

Michael Locke veers up. He has a savage look about him. “Well, Anna,” he says, “perhaps you will answer me this. If there is a general problem with *meaning*, why do we need a testing procedure for metaphors? And whilst we are on the subject, what does this testing procedure of yours look like?”

Anna looks from the Chairman to the Secretary and back again. She frowns. “Did you not read my application? I did quite a bit of research for you, outlining the general problems with meaning. I also outlined the metaphor testing procedure, even illustrated it with a real-world example. Rather a lot of work, altogether. Surely you have distributed my application to these philosophers here?”

The Secretary flushes. He fiddles with his tie. “Well yes, of course I did, my dear. It is merely, that, well, we don’t always have time to read everything in detail, you understand. Also, some of us are getting on a bit, you see. Sometimes forget what we have read, so to speak. Generally speaking, that is, I do not mean anyone in particular, naturally, of course”.

“Never mind,” Anna says, “I am happy to explain it again. With your permission, Professor Dennett, I will use *the selfish gene* example. And I will start with the procedure you described. Is that ok?”

Dennett nods. “Go ahead, he says. “It will be a pleasure not to hear myself talk for a change.” He sinks back in his chair, but he does not pick up his manual again.

“The idea is,” says Anna, “that you reverse-engineer a metaphor you are concerned about. You extract as many possibly meaningful parts as you can. Get other people to help you if necessary. In the case of *the selfish gene*, I extracted: a gene is a recognisable unit / endures over time / has a *self*/ has motives / wants its *self* to survive / is an agent / benefits from change for survival / can affect change.

“These little sentences are what Professor Dennett here calls the ‘knobs’, that you need to turn. You change them a little bit to see what happens. Exaggerate them. This is where my suggestions come in, because from literature we know our weak spots. We suffer from confirmation bias. We tend to attribute agency or trends to inanimate things, as is the case with this *selfish gene* metaphor. As a result of *priming*, that is, fusion of the physical with the psychological, we have unconscious associations with speed, size, colour, and temperature. Our cultural environment contains many ready-made conceptual

metaphors such as *argument = war* and *country = family* which we tend not to question, as Dr Lakoff here has already explained to you.”

Lakoff sits up a little straighter, an angelic expression on his round face, nodding emphatically. Anna continues. “Armed with this knowledge we can generate lots of interesting twists on these extracted sentences. Turn the knobs, so to speak. For instance: genes have split personalities / eternal life / democratic rights / plan their career / are narcissistic / get bored easily / have dangerous powers. Each sentence points to an aspect of the metaphor’s meaning which the author may or may not have intended. Which may then be reconsidered.”

She falls silent. Dennett gives her a thumbs-up. Michael Locke stares at her as if she has suggested to take a fishing trip together and he is to bring the worms. He rubs his nose. “Well then, Anna,” he says. “That was quite a speech. I wonder, might you have a suggestion to what metaphors we apply this procedure of yours? All? None? Or mayhap whenever we please?” His voice is dripping with sarcasm.

“Imagine,” Anna says mischievously. “The time is near when your word processor will help you identify the metaphors you have used<sup>37</sup>. Dennett triumphantly waves his manual on object oriented programming. Michael Locke looks utterly horrified. Anna giggles.

“Perhaps computer-aided text analysis is a bridge too far right now,” she says. “To answer your question, you apply this procedure, as you call it, whenever you want to be sure that your metaphors will not backfire. You see, it is your own responsibility. We must all play Sellars’ game of giving and asking for reasons. You have a commitment to the meaning of your metaphors, whether you are aware of it or not. Deontic scorekeeping halts for no one.”

In the pause that follows, the Chairman takes back control of the meeting. “Thank you, Anna,” he says. “We seem to be done here. And agreed, largely. I think we need to confer with Julian and Peter as the authors of the Open Philosophy® Toolkit. There are several entries that can be improved upon, that much has become clear. Unfortunately, they are not here today, so I suggest a committee to meet at a future date. If the Council agrees, I will endeavour to arrange this.”

There are nods of general assent. Michael Locke opens his mouth but then closes it again. The Chairman is filled with relief.

“I now close this meeting,” he says cheerfully. “The bar is open.”

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<sup>37</sup> Neuman et al., 2013; Zayed, McCrae, & Buitelaar, 2019

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