By far the most illuminating philosophical account of metaphor that I have ever read is Wolfgang Künne’s article “Im übertragenenen Sinne”. Zur Theorie der Metapher’, published in 1983. It combines meticulous scholarship, acute analysis, and exemplary lucidity; as is typical of Künne’s work. The following discussion of metaphor, although it reaches a different conclusion, is much indebted to that article.

It is of considerable interest in the philosophy of language whether one should attribute to certain expressions, or utterances, a metaphorical meaning beside their literal meaning; if so, how this metaphorical meaning is to be understood, and if not, how else one should explain our understanding of metaphors. My impression is that a lot of the things that have been said on this issue, especially the more polemical and vehement claims, are largely due to terminological carelessness, or a failure to take into account certain conceptual distinctions in the realm of linguistic meaning, in themselves simple and obvious enough, but nonetheless easily neglected in the heat of a philosophical argument. Therefore, instead of joining the fray immediately, I shall preface my remarks with some reminders about different concepts of meaning, in the form of a step-by-step account of common elements of linguistic understanding. In this I closely follow Künne’s procedure in his ‘Im übertragenenen Sinne’ (1983a, 183-186; cf. also 1983b, 196-202); except that I limit myself to four steps (instead of his six).

1 Concepts of Meaning

A. Word meaning. Anyone moderately proficient in the English language knows the meaning of the verb ‘to hear’. It means roughly the same as the
French ‘entendre’ or the German ‘hören’, namely: to perceive with the ears. Probably the most common use of the word ‘meaning’ (outside philosophy) is in the sense of just such attributions of meaning to types of words, or idiomatic expressions, dictionary-style: that is, apart from any particular utterance or inscription of the word or phrase.

**B. Sentence meaning.** Word types can be strung together to form sentence types, to which, abstracted from any particular occasion of utterance, we can attribute meaning. Thus any competent speaker of English knows what the following sentences (types) mean:

(1) Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

(2) This is indeed a surprise.

Understanding of sentence meaning is shown by paraphrase or the specification of possible contexts and the likely purpose of utterances of the sentence. It is important to note that in most cases the understanding of sentence meaning does not provide one with a full statement, true or false, or a question that could be answered. For that we have to move on to what I call:

**C. Utterance meaning.** Consider:

(3) His fencing is better than Tom’s.

Obviously, as it stands the sentence (3) is not something that could be assessed as true or false. For it to say something true or false – to express a thought (Frege), to make a statement (Strawson) – it needs to be uttered in a suitable context, which (a) disambiguates the sentence, and (b) provides a reference for its indexical elements. Depending on whether (3) is uttered in comment on a bout of swordplay or after inspecting some garden enclosures, a different sentence meaning will be activated. And (unless the speaker has been careless or intentionally obscure) it will be clear to the intended audience to whom the possessive pronoun is meant to refer and which Tom has been mentioned. Thus whenever a sentence contains an ambiguity or an indexical element, the linguistic meaning of the utterance is to be determined not only by the sentence meaning(s), but also by the relevant context or circumstances of the utterance.
There are more indexical elements in our utterances than one might think: First, of course, expressly deictic terms like ‘this’ or ‘that’. Secondly, relational expressions of time and space, like ‘now’, ‘yesterday’, ‘in the neighbourhood’ or ‘far away’. Thirdly, personal pronouns. Fourthly, proper names. (Even ‘London’ and ‘Paris’ have more than one bearer, let alone current first and family names.) Fifthly, most definite descriptions, like ‘the lady in the blue dress’, or ‘the little cat’. Even ‘the British Prime Minister’ refers to different people at different times. Moreover there are numerous implicit indexical elements, not indicated by any particular expression, but due to an omission of spelling out what under the circumstances goes without saying. Thus ‘It’s raining’ is normally said with reference to the time and place of the utterance. Assessments or evaluations are usually made with reference to particular kinds of performance, skill or merit, which in many circumstances it would be tedious to name, or to repeat in every sentence. Thus in many conversations it goes without saying that a remark like ‘Michael Schumacher is outstanding’ refers to his skills as a formula one driver. Naturally the same applies to comparisons. Or, when Jack Worthing asks his friend:

(4) You don’t think there is any chance of Gwendolen becoming like her mother in about a hundred and fifty years, do you, Algy?

– then the respect of comparison has been indicated by his earlier remark: ‘Her mother is perfectly unbearable. Never met such a Gorgon’.

To understand the utterance meaning is to understand what has been said, e.g. what statement has been made or what question has been asked. Note that what I call ‘utterance meaning’ is not what John Searle has called ‘speaker’s utterance meaning’, and sometimes for short just ‘speaker’s meaning’ or ‘utterance meaning’. This concept is of a different logical category: It takes as its subject a person, whereas what I call linguistic meaning is always attributed to a linguistic entity: a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a verbal utterance. In Searle’s term, ‘meaning’ does not mean semantic significance, but communicative intention. Apart from this difference in category, utterance meaning (in my sense) and speaker’s meaning (or intention) need not always agree, as my intention to express something is evidently not sufficient to guarantee that I do express it. In malapropisms, for example, the two come apart.
D. Insinuation. We frequently say something in order to convey something further without actually saying it. Thus when the question:

(1) Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

is answered:

(5) I did not think it polite to listen, sir.

– the speaker, Lane, insinuates, but does not say, that his employer’s musical performance was so unskilled that he should be embarrassed if others listened to it. Again, to say of someone that he is sober tonight is an effective way of giving others the impression that the person in question is drunk on many a night – without actually saying so, and hence without running the risk of being contradicted or accused of saying something untrue. What one insinuates in this manner (or ‘conversationally implicates’, as Paul Grice called it) is not part of one’s utterance’s linguistic meaning. What is insinuated need not be a claim, that something is the case, it can also be a request:

(6) The fish is delicious.

– or a threat:

(7) We’ll meet again.

Grice (1967, 39) suggested as a criterion to distinguish between insinuation (which he calls ‘conversational implicature’) and linguistic meaning that insinuation can be cancelled without a retraction of anything one said. For instance:

(8) The fish is delicious. But I’m afraid I can’t eat any more.

But this criterion does not always yield the right result. Consider:

(9) I would really like to eat some more of that delicious fish.

Unlike (6), this is, when addressed to one’s host, not just an insinuation, but an idiomatic and hence perfectly straightforward request for another helping. And yet it is possible to cancel that request without correcting or withdrawing (9), by adding:
But I fear I can’t: I’m too full.

The addition of (10) changes the context of (9) and hence its utterance meaning. This problem with the suggested criterion of cancellability is particularly patent in the case of the reference of indexicals, which can frequently be changed by an added remark. Yet without that remark the context would have made a certain understanding of the indexicals the correct one, that is, part of the utterance meaning. For instance,

A: I admire Charles Dickens.

B (pensively): He had a very unhappy childhood.

If B doesn’t say more, it will be correct to report him as having asserted that Charles Dickens had a very unhappy childhood. But suppose he continues:

– My grandfather, I mean. A bit like David Copperfield.

An added remark can change the context of an utterance and thus provide new references for its indexicals.

To avoid such counterexamples, I suggest to use a slightly different criterion: not the possibility of immediate cancellation, but that of subsequent denial: the question is whether later on it would be acceptable for the speaker to claim that his utterance was not, say, a request for a second helping. Had the dinner guest uttered only (9), he would hardly get away with such a subsequent denial; whereas it is perfectly believable that his utterance of (6) might have been merely praise, without any ulterior motive.

Even so, problems remain. The borderline between insinuations and somewhat roundabout ways of saying something is not a sharp one. Consider:

(11) What’s the time, please?

(12) Can you tell me what time it is?

(13) I wonder what time it is.

(14) Why did I not bring my watch?
(12) is just another way of asking question (11). One would not hesitate to report the speaker as asking what the time was. For to ask someone whether he can φ is often an idiomatic way of requesting him to φ. Hence in such a case the request is made explicitly: it is a matter of meaning, not just of insinuation. (14), on the other hand, when used to extract the same information as (11), would be a case of insinuation. Subsequent denial of a desire to be told the time would seem quite possible. Less clear is the classification of (13), which is not by convention a variant of question (11), yet it may well be natural to treat it as such. Here a lot depends on the details of the situation: the tone of voice and bodily movements of the speaker, and whether he or his interlocutor knew or was believed to know what time it was.

Perhaps more seriously, neither cancellability nor the possibility of subsequent denial is peculiar to what is conveyed beyond linguistic meaning (cf. Grice 1967, 44). Often certain elements of a word’s meaning are optional and can be explicitly cancelled without for that matter ceasing to be part of the word’s meaning, or one of its meanings. For example, the word ‘tabby’ means: ‘cat, especially female, with grey or brown stripes’. Thus, the report:

(15) There’s a tabby in the garden.

is slightly ambiguous and could be clarified by an express withdrawal of the merely optional implication that it is a female animal. Yet in a suitable context (for example, if a tomcat had been mentioned earlier in the conversation) an utterance of (15) would clearly mean, and not only insinuate, that there was a female cat in the garden.

2 Change of Word Meaning

The idea that word meanings can be affected by a sentential context: that to make sense of a certain combination of words we adapt their standard meanings, is not implausible. So for example in understanding the expression ‘rubber duck’, it would appear that we take ‘duck’ to mean the mere imitation of such an animal. Again, part of the standard meaning of the noun ‘lie’ is that there is an intention to deceive. But when idiomatically
one says: ‘I think I haven’t seen him for two years … no, I tell a lie: I saw him briefly last September’ – it is obvious that this aspect of the meaning has been cancelled. In this case ‘lie’ means simply ‘untruth’, yet the audience does not need to have learnt this as a separate meaning (as with homonyms): one easily understands this change of meaning as one encounters it.

Given such phenomena it is natural to suggest that metaphors too may involve spontaneous changes in word (utterance) meaning: the cancellation of semantic features that are incongruous in the circumstances. This is a position defended, for example, by Jonathan Cohen (1977) and Max Black (1977).

One objection to this view is that both the relevant and the incongruous features of the things mentioned are often not part of the words’ *linguistic meanings* (Künne 1983a, 191). Consider, for example, Hamlet’s plea to Laertes (V.ii.235f.):

(16) I have shot my arrow o’er the house, and hurt my brother.

If you subtract the features that do not fit the situation (in which he has killed Laertes’ father by mistake), you get something like:

(17) I wielded a weapon in a way that I couldn’t foresee the effects and harmed someone dear to me.

In a way (17) is indeed a correct explanation of the metaphor (16): it clearly brings out the gist of Hamlet’s remark. However, although it is true that by ‘I have shot my arrow o’er the house’ in (16) Hamlet means to express that he could not foresee the effects of his action, that is hardly part of the *linguistic meaning* of the words ‘I have shot my arrow o’er the house’. It relies on what we know about houses and archery. Hence the move from (16) to (17) cannot be achieved, as those theorists suggested, by the suppression of some incongruous semantic features of the words. – But perhaps this isn’t a conclusive objection. If we are prepared to countenance the *suppression* of semantic features in a word’s utterance meaning, then why not also a suitable *addition* of such features, drawn from our general knowledge of the objects involved and also from the system of associated commonplaces?
Be that as it may, there is another objection which I believe is harder to answer. Cancelling a metaphor’s incongruous semantic features would often amount to a removal of the very image. As I said, in a way (17) is a useful explanation of the metaphor (16). But one hesitates to call it an accurate expression of the linguistic meaning of (16), for after all in (16) something was said about an arrow and a house, which an account of that statement’s linguistic meaning should reflect. Even if one is perfectly happy with that sort of literal paraphrase of what a metaphor conveys, the fact remains that the metaphor does not convey this straightforwardly, but by means of an image, which should somehow figure in a complete account of the metaphor’s linguistic meaning.

3 Metaphor as Insinuation

Such considerations convinced many that metaphors should not be explained in terms of a change of word meaning.\(^1\) Some indeed went even further than this denial, to the other extreme, holding that what metaphors make us understand is not a matter of any kind of linguistic meaning, but of insinuation. This is a position held by John Searle,\(^2\) Donald Davidson and Wolfgang Künne, who differ however in their explanations of how we understand what is metaphorically insinuated. In fact, Davidson offers no explanation whatsoever of our metaphorical understanding. His account is purely, and unashamedly, causal: a metaphor – ‘like a bump on the head’ – makes us realize certain things (Davidson 1978, 262). By likening metaphors to bumps on the head, Davidson implies that we haven’t got the foggiest idea how metaphors can communicate anything; which sounds extremely implausible. However, the problem with this view is not just that it is uninformative, but that it deprives us of any standards of correctness. If Davidson were right, one could not be said to misunderstand or misinter-

\(^1\) This insight is not new. Already in 1838 Friedrich Schleiermacher (1838, 59) observed that in metaphors words retain their proper meaning. The passage is quoted in Künne 1983a, 192.

\(^2\) Searle (1977, 83f.) argued that metaphors should be explained in terms of ‘speakers’ meaning’, that is intention and not linguistic meaning. The ambiguity of the English word ‘meaning’ is often overlooked.
pret a metaphor (Lycan 2000, 212). But clearly, with most metaphors some interpretations are correct or appropriate, while others are wide off the mark. Although Davidson refuses to explain how metaphors work their remarkable effects on people, the way he characterizes those effects is in no way eccentric:

A metaphor makes us attend to some likeness.

[A] simile tells us, in part, what a metaphor merely nudges us into noting. (Davidson 1978, 247, 253)

In practice then, Davidson appears happy to treat metaphors as compressed similes: compressed in a way that the comparison is not drawn explicitly, but only insinuated. That is also Künne’s and (with some qualifications) Searle’s view.

Perhaps not a lot depends on whether or not the word ‘meaning’ is applied to the content of a metaphor, as long as there’s some general agreement on what that content is. But there is, I believe, a strong case against pushing metaphorical content outside the domain of semantics:

In many cases of straightforward conversational metaphors the criterion of subsequent denial tells against the insinuation view. The speaker is clearly committed to the metaphorical content of his utterance, just as much as if he had made his point literally. Subsequent attempts to shirk this commitment are quite ridiculous:

(18) When I said ‘Their marriage is on the rocks’, I didn’t mean to suggest that they were not perfectly happy in their marriage.

(19) True, I called you a ‘louse’, but I didn’t say anything insulting.

Grice’s model of indirect communication is this: You say one thing, and on top of that you insinuate something else. You say that a student has good handwriting and give your audience to understand that the student’s academic work cannot be commended. You praise the wine and thus, indirectly, invite your host to refill your glass. In such paradigm cases, insin-

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3 The first sentence, at any rate, requires the addition ‘or dissimilarity’, to take care of cases where we find that the speaker is wrong in what he is metaphorically trying to communicate.
uation is based on a perfectly regular and meaningful utterance, albeit one that at face value may appear somewhat idle or irrelevant. And only because what is said is meaningful can the speaker plausibly deny responsibility for what is merely insinuated: ‘I didn’t mean to imply … All I said was …’. With metaphors the situation is usually quite different. Taken literally, most metaphors would be plain nonsense. Therefore, they cannot be construed, like those cases of indirect communication, as literally saying one thing and hinting at something else. Often on the literal level nothing has been said. On the insinuation account, there wouldn’t be a meaningful linguistic utterance in the first place. But that is implausible. For, as Künne (1983a, 193) himself observes, metaphors can be used to make assertions. They can be assessed as (non-trivially) true or false. The mate who mischievously entered into the log: ‘Today the Captain is sober’ insinuated that normally the Captain was drunk, but he didn’t assert it, and so the Captain could not defend his reputation by replying: ‘That’s not true’. By contrast, if you disagree with what is communicated by the metaphorical report that someone’s marriage is on the rocks, the response ‘That’s not true’ is perfectly appropriate.

Of course, the content of a metaphor can be more or less clear. And in some cases it may be quite impossible to identify any metaphorical meaning. If, for instance, in the middle of a perfunctory exchange about the weather I remarked:

(20) He that is giddy takes two horses to water.

– you may well suspect that I spoke metaphorically, without being able to work out what I had in mind. Indeed, if the situation provided no clues and I refused to make myself clearer, we should have to say that if I intended to use a metaphor – I failed. Under the circumstance, my utterance of (20) had no metaphorical meaning. But in such cases we should be equally disinclined to say that anything was insinuated.

4 The Comparison View

The position I wish to defend is that in a metaphorical utterance, although all words are taken in their ordinary sense, the sentence as a whole is con-
strued differently – namely as an abbreviated comparison. That is the metaphor’s *implicit* meaning. It is made explicit by spelling out the underlying comparison (cf. Alston 1964, 99). What speaks strongly in favour of the comparison view is that when people are asked to explain the meaning of a metaphor they used, they will normally, if co-operative, transform the metaphor into a comparison and then explicate the relevant points of similarity. Nonetheless, this apparently commonsensical approach, the comparison view, has been the whipping boy in nearly all recent philosophical discussions of metaphor. As the entry in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* concludes:

> And though no consensus has yet emerged on how and what metaphors contribute to meaning, nor how we recognize what they contribute, near-consensus has emerged on the thesis that they do not work as elliptical similes. (Wolterstorff 1999, 562)

As so often, philosophers agree only in their dismissal of the view that things are simply as they appear to be (which would threaten to put them out of work). Before scrutinizing the numerous objections that have been levelled at the comparison view, I should like to clarify briefly in what sense a metaphor could be regarded as an *abbreviated* or *elliptical* comparison.

Clearly, the comparison view should not be understood as identifying a metaphor with an *abbreviation* in the ordinary sense. An abbreviation, say ‘PTO’, is merely a notational device. It is not a different sentence from ‘please turn over’, but merely a more economical way of writing down that sentence. It is a transformation of symbols into symbols that could, theo-

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4 Quintilian writes: ‘metaphora brevior est similitudo’ (*Institutio Oratoria*, 8.6.8); however, he is not really a proponent of (what I call) the comparison view as he regards metaphors as due to a change in *word* meaning (8.6.1, 8.6.5): ‘Tropos est verbi vel sermonis a propria significatione in aliam cum virtute mutatio. […] Transfertur ergo nomen aut verbum ex eo loco in quo proprium est in eum in quo aut proprium deest aut tralatum proprio melius est.’ (‘A trope is the conversion of a word or phrase, from its proper meaning to another, in order to increase its force. […] A noun or a verb is accordingly transferred from that place in the language to which it properly belongs, to one in which there is either no proper word, or in which the metaphorical word is preferable to the proper.’)
retically, be carried out without any understanding of their meaning; which is quite unlike the case of metaphor. A more promising model in that respect is an *ellipsis*, that is, the ‘omission of one or more words in a sentence, which would be needed to complete the grammatical construction or fully to express the sense’ (*OED*). Obviously, it is only the latter disjunct that could fit the case of metaphor: what forces us to replace or complement the literal sentence meaning is no syntactic defect, but the realization that taken literally the utterance makes no good sense, or is utterly pointless. Even so, ellipsis is not quite the right model for the metaphorical shortening of a comparison, because the underlying comparison cannot always be spelled out simply by inserting ‘one or more words’. To be sure, a metaphor as simple as:

(21) Life is a dream

can be transformed into a comparison by inserting the word ‘like’:

(22) Life is like a dream.

But it is not possible to deal in similar fashion with many metaphors only slightly less straightforward, such as Othello’s announcement of his imminent death (V.ii.265):

(23) Here is my journey’s end.

For, in general, a statement of the form ‘This is like my X’ is normally taken to mean that there *is* such an X, had by the speaker, whereas Othello is not referring to an actual journey he has undertaken; he is only likening his life to a journey. Roughly speaking, the personal pronoun belongs to what Max Black calls the ‘literal frame’ of the metaphor, not its ‘focus’. We could paraphrase:

(24) Here is something (the end of my life) that is like the end of a journey.

Or:

(25) My life is like a journey and my death is like that journey’s end.
Either way, the literal paraphrase requires more than the insertion of a word or two. And that is even clearer in cases where a *verb* phrase is used *im übertragenen Sinne*, for instance, when Macbeth speaks of:

\[(26) \text{Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleave of care. (II.ii.36)}\]

Here the metaphorical terminology of ‘frame’ and ‘focus’ is particularly apt: The metaphorical image (‘knits up the ravelled sleave’) is framed in by the words ‘sleep’ and ‘care’ that indicate the subject matter. The implicit comparison is this:

\[(27) \text{Sleep’s impact on care is like someone’s knitting up the ravelled sleave of a garment.}\]

This example illustrates well how the shortening of a comparison into a metaphor is by no means just a matter of dropping the word ‘like’, or a similar expression. As the italics in (27) indicate, fragments of both sides of the comparison – the literal denotation of the subject matter and the image – are merged in the metaphor (26).

There is no mechanical procedure for spelling out the comparison that is condensed in a metaphor, no simple syntactic rule. One could list numerous patterns of compression – like ‘What *A* does to *B* is like someone’s *φing* the *C* of something’ condensed into ‘*A* *φs* the *C* of *B*’ – but it would be otiose to do so. Such schemata play no rôle in our understanding of metaphors. We rely entirely on common sense to work out from case to case which comparison could plausibly be intended under the circumstances.

5 Objections to the Comparison View

1. Isn’t the comparison view just too simple to be true? ‘If a metaphor is only short for the corresponding simile, then it is simply synonymous with the simile and should not be heard as anomalous or puzzling in the first place’ (Lycan 2000, 213). – And indeed, metaphors in general are *not* heard as anomalous or puzzling. I take a random example from a newspaper at hand:

\[(28) \text{George Remi was one of the giants of twentieth-century popular culture.}\]
Is there anything ‘anomalous or puzzling’ about that statement? No. It does contain a metaphor, but so does virtually every paragraph of journalistic writing and the majority of ordinary conversations. Our everyday language abounds in metaphors, and it would have to be a dim-witted fellow indeed to be puzzled by something like the use of the word ‘giant’ in (28).

It is a common fault in philosophical accounts of metaphor to consider only particularly impressive poetic metaphors, losing sight of the fact that most metaphors are perfectly ordinary means of communication. A metaphor by Mallarmé, Rilke or Auden may indeed be surprising and difficult to interpret, but that is not simply on account of its being a metaphor. The distorting neglect of the ordinary is particularly flagrant in Davidson’s well-known article, which begins with a page of fanciful rhetoric celebrating the dreamlike qualities of metaphor: how every metaphor involves creativity and ‘artistic success’ (1978, 245). In a more sober-minded passage Davidson (1978, 262f.; my ital.) claims that ‘it is hard to decide, even in the case of the simplest metaphors, exactly what the content is supposed to be’, because what a metaphor makes us notice ‘is not, in general, propositional in character’ – ‘Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture’. – With regard to common-or-garden metaphors, like (28), – that is, the great majority of metaphors we come across – such exalted claims are plainly ridiculous. But even if we tried to rectify Davidson’s account by limiting its application to uncommonly imaginative metaphors, it wouldn’t work. Davidson wants to have his cake and eat it, trying to combine cognitive virtues with ineffability: A metaphor makes us ‘notice’ things, which can be ‘true or false’ – and yet in general they’re ‘not propositional in character’ (Davidson 1978, 257, 263; my ital.). Sic. –

Perhaps one might want to suggest that humdrum metaphors like (28) are so readily understandable only because they are dead metaphors. And dead metaphors, it might be added, are no longer metaphors at all: As soon as the metaphorical use of an expression becomes conventional and receives a distinct entry in a dictionary (e.g.: ‘pig […] 3 a greedy or dirty

5 Davidson (1978, 245) also declares that ‘there is no test for metaphor that does not call for taste’; and ‘there are no unsuccessful metaphors, just as there are no unfunny jokes’. I should like to add that there are no unhappy marriages and no invalid arguments.
person’) it ceases to be a metaphor: it’s now merely a case of polysemy (cf.
Künne 1983a, 187). – But here we need to distinguish between a conven-
tional, or idiomatic, metaphor and a dead metaphor. Most proverbs are
idiomatic metaphors that have long been recorded by lexicographers. Their
conventionality notwithstanding, they are usually alive and kicking as
metaphors. Consider, for instance, ‘A bird in the hand is worth two in the
bush’. For one thing, it is not required for understanding an utterance of
that proverb that one has learnt it as an idiomatic way of saying that it’s
better to accept what one has than to try to get more and risk losing every-
thing. Even someone who has never heard the proverb before will be able
to grasp the point, simply on the basis of understanding the literal meaning
of the sentence. For another thing, even those familiar with the proverb
will still hear it as an indirect way of making the point by means of an im-
age. In a properly dead metaphor, by contrast, the image is usually buried
in the expression’s etymology, or at any rate no longer fully realized. The
word ‘desultory’, for example, is derived from the Latin ‘desultor’: which
meant a Roman circus rider who during a race would leap from one horse
to another. A fine metaphor for a desultory person, but no longer alive in
the English word, whose etymology is not widely known.

In other cases of dead metaphors speakers may still be aware of the
image, but not regard the expression as an indirect means of describing
something. The word ‘toadstool’ provides a charming image, but it’s sim-
ply the standard English term for some types of fungi. (And you can’t tell
which ones are called ‘toadstools’ simply by understanding the image.)

A third type of dead, or at least moribund, metaphor is an idiomatic
expression whose figurative character is still vaguely felt, but no longer
properly understood. Thus, few people have a very accurate notion of what
it would be like to be literally hoist with one’s own petard. One just takes it
as a quaint way of saying ‘affected adversely by one’s schemes against
others’. The image has largely evaporated.

However, to call an extraordinarily able or influential person a ‘giant’
is still a perfectly healthy metaphor, albeit far from original. A dictionary
may contain an extra entry for the common metaphorical use of the word,
but that entry would – quite correctly – be marked: ‘fig’. Hackneyed or not,
it is a figurative use: George Remi was not literally a giant. The metaphor

is clearly perceived as such; and we need not have heard it before to understand it.

To return to the objection raised above, one might still be concerned that if a metaphor were merely some sort of abbreviation of a comparison there should be nothing non-literal about it. Unlike a metaphor, an abbreviation, even if it’s not just conventional, can be taken au pied de la lettre. – Well, it can – after it has been spelled out. What we take literally is not really the abbreviation itself, but what we know it to be an abbreviation for. Yet in that sense a metaphor too is to be taken literally; that is to say, its content: the comparison implied by the metaphor is to be taken literally.\(^6\)

Still, there seems to be a considerable difference between metaphors and abbreviations in that the former involve a clash between two different meanings or contents: a literal and a metaphorical one. – Not so. What is here called the ‘literal meaning’ of a metaphorical utterance is not its meaning at all, but merely what one might mistake for its meaning if one fails to realize that it’s a metaphor. Again, we must be careful to distinguish between sentence meaning and utterance meaning. The sentence ‘My home is my castle’ has a literal meaning; an obviously metaphorical utterance of the sentence has only a metaphorical meaning. There is no conflict between the literal and the metaphorical, as there is no question of taking the utterance literally (unless, of course, it is really unclear whether a metaphorical meaning was intended).\(^7\) Indeed, for many metaphors a literal meaning does not even exist on the sentence level, because taken literally the sentence is patent nonsense (e.g., ‘Old men are babies’). In yet other cases, there is not even a semblance of a tension, as the literal sentence meaning is fully operative in an understanding of a metaphorical utterance of the sentence, because the sentence only contains the image (e.g., ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth’), while its metaphorical application is conveyed by uttering the sentence in a suitable context. Here the utterance meaning results from adding to the sentence meaning (roughly speaking:  

\(^6\) The denial of the claim that a metaphor or a simile can be transformed into a literal comparison will be discussed under 5.9.  

\(^7\) Just as there is no conflict between the meaning of the noun ‘fig’ and the meaning of those three letters when used as an abbreviation of ‘figurative’.
‘… and something similar happens in this situation’); not, as in other cases, from replacing direct predication by comparison.

2. Virtually any sentence could in a suitable situation be used metaphorically. But then, it has been objected, the comparison view would have to regard almost every sentence as ‘semantically ambiguous, as between its literal meaning and its simile-abbreviating meaning […] But such a proliferation of supposedly genuine semantic ambiguities is surely implausible’ (Lycan 2000, 217). – Is it? Virtually any declarative sentence can be used not only to make a statement, but also (by raising the voice at the end) to ask a question; and with many it is also possible (for someone in a position of authority) to utter them as an order. So almost all declarative sentences are ambiguous. For instance, ‘You live in London’ can be used in its declarative meaning, or as an abbreviated form of ‘Do you live in London?’, or to express the order ‘Live in London!’ . Is this a ‘surely implausible proliferation of supposed ambiguities’? – No. Call it ‘ambiguity’ if you like, but there’s nothing remarkable, let alone implausible, about it. And it is quite misleading to call it ‘semantic ambiguity’ which suggests that some word involved has different meanings; as in (3) above. Obviously it would be implausible to propose an account of metaphor according to which all words are ambiguous in the way ‘fence’ or ‘bank’ are – and that is the bugbear invoked by the objection’s rhetoric. But not even Black and Cohen, who do hold that in a metaphorical utterance words change their meaning (see section 2), are committed to that sort of ambiguity: for the new meaning is not something you have to learn in advance, word by word. You only need to master, in general, the kind of processes that take you from the literal to the figurative, and from the figurative to the literal. On the comparison view it is, roughly speaking, the step from comparison to predication that has to be mastered.

3. One reason Davidson gives against the comparison view, or indeed any other semantic approach to metaphors, can be dismissed equally quickly. He inveighs against ‘the idea that a metaphor has, in addition to its literal sense or meaning, another sense or meaning’ (1978, 246), because:

It is no help in explaining how words work in metaphor to posit metaphorical or figurative meanings, or special kinds of poetic or metaphorical truth. These ideas don’t explain metaphor, metaphor
explains them. Once we understand metaphor we can call what we grasp the ‘metaphorical truth’ and (up to a point) say what the ‘metaphorical meaning’ is. But simply to lodge this meaning in the metaphor is like explaining why a pill puts you to sleep by saying it has a dormative power. Literal meaning and literal truth conditions can be assigned to words and sentences apart from particular contexts of use. This is why adverting to them has genuine explanatory power. (Davidson 1978, 247)

And again:

The point of the concept of linguistic meaning is to explain what can be done with words. But the supposed figurative meaning of a simile explains nothing; it is not a feature of the word that the word has prior to and independent of the context of use, and it rests upon no linguistic customs except those that govern ordinary meaning. (Ibid., 255)

This is the old and tedious philosophers’ game of producing excitingly paradoxical claims by using words in an arbitrarily redefined sense. When ‘inveighing against metaphorical meaning’, Davidson takes ‘meaning’ to stand only for (A) word meaning or (B) sentence meaning, that is, for meanings of types of linguistic expressions. He ignores that it is also perfectly common to ask of a particular utterance in a particular situation what it means; which is exactly the kind of meaning his opponents have in mind. It is of course true that utterance meanings are not ‘explanatory’ in the same way as word meanings. Our knowledge of the latter largely explains our understanding of the former. But then even sentence (type) meanings – which Davidson seems happy to accept – are not explanatory in this sense: they are not learnt one by one in advance, but (like utterance meanings) for the most part construed as we go along from our knowledge of word meanings and the ways words can be meaningfully strung together.

Anyway, once Davidson’s eccentrically narrow sense of the word ‘meaning’ has been made clear, his claim that there is no metaphorical ‘meaning’ loses much of its sting. Just as we would not be greatly agitated by the claim that no animals can fly – once it has emerged that the speaker wishes to restrict the extension of the term ‘animal’ to mammals. Of course
you cannot *explain* why a pill puts you to sleep by invoking its dormative power; but you can very aptly *describe* the pill as having dormative power. Similarly, we cannot explain our understanding of non-conventional metaphors by reference to prior knowledge of context-independent metaphorical meanings, but it does not follow that we may not correctly attribute to a particular utterance a metaphorical meaning (as the internal object of our understanding, rather than as a prior piece of knowledge instrumental for achieving that understanding).

As regards Davidson’s (unsupported) claim that figurative meaning would rest ‘upon no linguistic customs except those that govern ordinary meaning’ (1978, 255), I think a little reflection shows that it is not true. Imagine a linguistic community that regards all non-literal forms of expression as unacceptable. People virtually never use metaphors, and when someone does, he is frowned upon and corrected: “‘Jim is a pig’? Don’t be silly! You know perfectly well that he’s a human being and not a pig. Perhaps you think that the way he eats asparagus is somewhat similar to the way a pig eats, but that doesn’t mean that he *is* a pig.’ Under such circumstances Davidson would be correct to say that there are no linguistic customs to accommodate figurative meaning. But of course our languages are not like that. We do not treat metaphors, like malapropisms, as deviations from correct usage, where one can perhaps understand what the speaker had in mind, but takes him to have failed to give it an acceptable linguistic expression. Far from it. Not only do our languages abound in conventional metaphors, but the spontaneous formation of new metaphors is common and idiomatic. It undoubtedly is a linguistic custom with us that metaphors are not treated as solecisms, but as perfectly acceptable, indeed often elegant forms of comparison. For someone to dismiss any metaphorical statement as absurd, instead of assessing it as a comparison, non-trivially true or false, would be a sign of linguistic deficiency, that is, ignorance of a prevalent linguistic custom.

4. Attempting to discredit the comparison view, Max Black makes the following observation:

[T]o suppose that the metaphorical statement is an abstract or précis of a literal point-by-point comparison, in which the primary and secondary subjects are juxtaposed for the sake of noting dis-
similarities as well as similarities, is to misconstrue the function of a metaphor. In discursively comparing one subject with another, we sacrifice the distinctive power and effectiveness of a good metaphor. (Black 1977, 30f.)

Indubitably; but what Black rejects here is not the comparison view, as sketched above or defended by anyone I have come across. Black conflates two different senses of the word ‘comparison’; or rather, he got hold of the wrong one. A comparison can be a process or act of comparing things, possibly point by point; or it can be a statement that two things are in some respect similar. In English this categorial difference is marked by different propositions: you may compare A with B, and conclude that they are altogether dissimilar; but comparing A to B means claiming that they are in some relevant respect alike. (‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’ is not an inquiry whether similarities and dissimilarities between the two should be impartially catalogued, but asks whether it would be apt to call the two alike.) It should be obvious that the comparison view – the view that a comparison expresses the linguistic meaning of a metaphor – takes the word ‘comparison’ in the latter sense: meaning a statement, not a process.

5. The same confusion appears to have led Searle to present the following argument:

The simplest way to show that the crude versions of the comparison view are false is to show that, in the production and understanding of metaphorical utterances, there need not be any two objects for comparison. […] If I say

[…] Sally is not a block of ice,

that, I take it, does not invite the absurd question: Which block of ice is it that you are comparing Sally with [!], in order to say that she is not like it. At its crudest, the comparison theory is just muddled about the referential character of expressions used metaphorically. (Searle 1977, 91)

By now it should be clear that the muddle is Searle’s. But even apart from the confusion of ‘comparing to’ and ‘comparing with’, the argument is a
dud. Whether you compare your neighbour to a bulldog, or whether you inquire to what extent his gait resembles that of a penguin, the question ‘Which one?’ (which bulldog? which penguin?) would be as inappropriate as in Searle’s example. Nor does comparing your aunt Agatha to, or with, Lady Macbeth presuppose the existence of the latter.

6. A bit further down in his well-known article on metaphor, Searle writes:

A second simple argument to show that metaphorical assertions are not necessarily assertions of similarity is that often the metaphorical assertion can remain true even though it turns out that the [corresponding] statement of similarity [...] is false. (Searle 1977, 92)

Given, for example, that Richard is ‘fierce, nasty and prone to violence’, the metaphorical assertion ‘Richard is a gorilla’ would be true, even if it turned out that as a matter of fact gorillas are wrongly believed to have those characteristics, so that ‘Richard is like a gorilla’ would be false.

The example is infelicitous, as the metaphorical use of ‘gorilla’ has long become conventional. Thus the Concise Oxford Dictionary lists two meanings:

gorilla n. 1 the largest anthropoid ape [...] 2 colloq. a heavily built man of aggressive demeanour.

I argued above that a conventional metaphor may still be perceived and treated as a metaphor; but of course it need not be so taken. It is possible now to learn the word ‘gorilla’ simply as a term for a heavily built man of aggressive demeanour, ignoring that for most people it is still a metaphor. Accordingly, it is indeed open to Searle to take this simply as a case of ambiguity and say that ‘Richard is like a gorilla₁’ is false; whereas ‘Richard is a gorilla₂’ is true. But then the difference in truth values is simply due to an ambiguity and does not support any claim about metaphors. So let us consider another example, where there is no alternative to a metaphorical interpretation: In the middle ages the hoopoe was believed to look after its parents in their old age (a belief that can be traced back to a widely read tract on animals from about 200 AD, the Physiologus). Suppose we encounter a metaphor (known to be) based on that false belief: Sue is
called a hoopoe on account of her devoted care for her old mother. How then are we to judge the claims:

(29) Sue is a hoopoe.
(30) Sue is like a hoopoe.

I think there are two likely responses:

(i) Someone may object to the comparison (30), protesting that in the relevant respect Sue is not at all like a hoopoe, since as a matter of fact grown-up hoopoes do not show the slightest interest in their parents’ welfare. But someone who took this line would hardly accept (29) as true either. There would be a patent inconsistency in saying (in the circumstances): ‘Sue is not at all like a hoopoe, but of course she is a hoopoe.’ One might well agree that what the speaker uttering (29) or (30) meant to convey about Sue was understandable and perfectly true (she is good to one of her parents), but that must be distinguished from what was actually said. As noted above, speaker’s meaning is not the same as utterance meaning; and as far as the latter is concerned, a stickler for ornithological truth would regard both (29) and (30) as erroneous.

(ii) On a more charitable interpretation, however, one may still be prepared to call Sue a hoopoe – meaning the parent-nursing hoopoe of folklore (or the *Physiologus*). After all it is perfectly common to give metaphorical characterizations in terms of fictional or mythological characters, but also of historical characters as represented in popular accounts that may well be inaccurate. Thus the appropriateness of calling someone a Judas, or a Pontius Pilate, will be assessed according to their portrayals in the *New Testament*, independently of one’s views on that book’s historical ac-

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8 A similar explanation, given by Fogelin (1988, 44f.), has been criticized as ‘ad hoc’ (Lycan 2000, 225, n. 8). But in fact this is not much of an objection, as our understanding of utterance meanings is virtually always to some extent ad hoc; that is, we must constantly adapt our general linguistic knowledge to a particular situation: pick up indexical elements, disambiguate, and be prepared for various sorts of deviation from semantic norms, intentional or unintentional. It is unrealistic to expect utterance meaning to be neatly derivable like the theorems of a logical calculus. And to a very large extent our understanding has to be guided by the ‘principle of charity’, the assumption that for the most part what people say makes sense and is not entirely silly.
accuracy. But then of course colloquial comparisons to Judas or Pontius Pilate will be treated in exactly the same way; and similarly, (30) can be understood as comparing Sue to the hoopoe of folklore. Thus, where a metaphor based on popular and possibly erroneous conceptions is found acceptable, the corresponding comparison has exactly the same claim to be called correct.

7. Perhaps the most common objection to the comparison view is this: A metaphorical statement (‘A is an F’) cannot be explained as a statement of similarity (‘A is like an F’), for, as Searle put it:

Similarity is a vacuous predicate: any two things are similar in some respect or other. (Searle 1977, 96; cf. Künne 1983a, 189)

Likewise, Davidson complained that the comparison view makes the hidden meaning of the metaphor all too obvious and accessible. In each case the hidden meaning is to be found simply by looking to the literal meaning of what is usually a painfully trivial simile. This is like that [...]. It is trivial because everything is like everything and in endless ways. (Davidson 1978, 254)

The upshot of a metaphor would appear to be an idle triviality, whereas in fact it is often interesting, illuminating, exciting or controversial. But is it true that everything is like everything? Is a dandelion like a divorce case? Is a penalty shoot-out like a prime number? Some philosophers have offered a proof that any two objects resemble each other. It goes like this: Take any two objects $A$ and $B$. $A$ has the property of being $A$, and $B$ has the property of being $B$. Now put these two properties together, forming the property of being either $A$ or $B$. This is a property shared by both objects $A$ and $B$. Hence they resemble each other in this respect. So a penalty shoot-out and a prime number resemble each other in so far as each of them has the following property: it is either a penalty shoot-out or a prime number. – But this is hardly in agreement with our concept of a property: being either this or that is not what we would normally call a property; it is a disjunction of two properties. To put it differently: all that that proof really estab-

\footnote{Cf. Peirce 1935, § 402; Künne 1983a, 189.}
lishes is that for any pair of objects you can define a class that contains only these two objects. But belonging to the same arbitrarily defined class is not the same as being similar.

In any case, Searle and Davidson do not rely on that proof. All they need to say is that for anything we compare we will normally be able to find some kind of similarity, be it ever so far-fetched. And that seems plausible enough. Any two people resemble each other in this: that they are both human beings. A dandelion and an aircraft carrier are similar in that they are both material objects. And a dandelion and a divorce case have at least that much in common that their English names both begin with a ‘d’.

Let us take a closer look at comparisons. Three types can be distinguished: First, detailed comparisons, where the point of resemblance is specified. For instance:

(31) Gussie looks like a fish.

(32) You’re like Gibbon, never giving credit for a good motive when a base one can be found.

A common way of specifying the point of comparison is by describing the object of comparison accordingly. Thus, instead of (32) one could also say:

(33) You’re like Gibbon who never gave credit for a good motive when a base one could be found.

Instead of singling out an individual, one can also give the object of comparison by an indefinite description:

(34) Like a huge fish swimming into a hitherto unexplored, unexpectedly exciting aquarium, he sailed resolutely forward.

Secondly, context-based comparisons. The point of resemblance may be unnecessary to specify because it has been mentioned earlier in the same conversation. If only a few moments ago Gibbon’s suspicious nature was mentioned, instead of (32) or (33), one could simply say:

(35) You’re like Gibbon.

Similarly, when a photograph of Gussie is being inspected (rather than his behaviour), (31) might well be shortened to:
(36) He’s like a fish.

Lord Windermere declares that he hasn’t been unfaithful to his wife, but she retorts incredulously:

(37) Why should you be different from other men?

An utterance that under different circumstances could have quite a different meaning, for example, that Lord W. was likely to resemble other men in his obsession with competitive sports.

Thirdly, in salience-based comparisons the aspect of comparison is what virtually everyone will be expected to know (or have heard, or be able to imagine) about the object of comparison, as far as it is applicable to the subject of comparison.

(38) Kasparov is another Bobby Fischer.\(^{10}\)

(39) You are like a child.

Note how in both examples not all the salient features of the object of comparison are meant to be attributed to the subject. Fischer is known to have been the world’s best chess player, and so is Kasparov (at the time of utterance, say). However, it is also well-known that Fischer is American and won the world championship in the 70s, neither of which could be said of Kasparov. Again, children have a number of salient or typical features. They tend to be naïve, unreasonable, irresponsible, playful and small, to name a few. It is very likely that in an utterance of (39) the salient features of the addressee will narrow down the point of resemblance to only one property from the list; for example, if the person is known to spend hours each week toying with his model railway, yet there is no reason to believe him childlike in any other way. The features of the subject that guide and restrict the applicability of salient features of the object of comparison can of course also be provided by the context, say, a description of the subject that was given a few moments ago. In that case we have a combination of the second and third type of comparison.

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\(^{10}\) NB: not a (live) metaphor. One meaning of ‘another’ is ‘a person like or comparable to’ (*Oxford Concise Dictionary*).
Davidson construes non-detailed comparisons, ‘A resembles B’, as:

\[(40) \quad (\exists x)(A \text{ is like } B \text{ in respect } x)\].

It should now be obvious why that is a mistake. In a non-detailed comparison the point of resemblance is left unsaid because it goes without saying (it is evident thanks to the context or some presupposed background knowledge); not, as Davidson’s construal suggests, because there is no particular point of resemblance at issue. Of course Davidson would try to account for the point of the comparison in terms of insinuation, rather than meaning. But that is implausible. The distinguishing mark of insinuation (as opposed to an implication of the utterance meaning) is that the speaker is not committed to it: that his subsequent denial would be credible, or at any rate acceptable. Yet, clearly, when Lady Windermere utters (37) she expresses doubts about her husband’s faithfulness; no subsequent denial would be plausible. To see how implausible it is to limit the implications of linguistic meaning to what a speaker says in so many words, just consider an utterance like ‘I do’ in a wedding ceremony. Who would want to regard that as the vacuous and non-committal statement that the person does something or other?

Context-based comparisons are most plausibly construed as involving an implicit indexical element:

\[(41) \quad A \text{ is like } B \text{ in that respect.}\]

Davidson is right in saying that everything is like everything else in endless ways, but it doesn’t follow that every utterance of a sentence of the form ‘A is like B’ is true; just as it is not always true to say ‘The Outer Hebrides are 500 miles away’, although it is indubitably true that the Outer Hebrides are 500 miles away from some other places.

Salience-based comparisons should be analysed roughly as follows:

\[(42) \quad A \text{ is like } B \text{ as far as those salient features of } B \text{ that appear applicable to } A \text{ are concerned.}\]

Again, Davidson’s construal of ‘A is like B’ as ‘A is like B in at least one respect’ is incorrect. Just as:

\[(43) \quad \text{Jones is a successful man.}\]
– is not the trivial statement that:

(44) Jones is a man who has been successful on at least one occasion.

(45) \((\exists x)(\text{Jones is a man who has succeeded in } x)\).

– for instance, in untying a knot in his shoelaces. Rather, (43) means that
Jones has been successful in salient and important matters in his life.

8. Searle’s final and most challenging objection to the comparison
view is this:

[T]here seem to be a great many metaphorical utterances [of the
form ‘\(S \text{ is } P\)’] where there is not relevant literal corresponding
similarity between \(S\) and \(P\). If we insist that there are always such
similes [of the form ‘\(S \text{ is like } P\)’], it looks as if we would have to
interpret them metaphorically, and thus our account would be cir-
cular. (Searle 1977, 96)

Searle’s main example is

(46) Sally is a block of ice.

One might suggest the similarity that both are cold; but calling Sally cold
would just be another metaphor. Searle (1977, 105) holds that in such cases
the metaphor is not based on a similarity (as he admits many if not most
metaphors are), but it is simply ‘a fact about our sensibility, whether cul-
turally or naturally determined, that we just do perceive a connection, so
that the utterance of \(P\) [e.g., “a block of ice”] is associated in our minds
with \(R\) properties [e.g., being unemotional]’.

To assess this objection we need to discuss two separate questions:
First, is Searle right in asserting that there are no similarities that can ac-
count for our understanding of utterances of (46) and the like? Secondly, if
a figurative expression is not based on similarity, should it be classified as
a metaphor? As it happens, it seems to me not too difficult to find some
similarities that could explain our understanding of (46); and therefore I
am happy to call this expression a metaphor. But had Searle succeeded in
giving an example where indeed no relevant similarities could be found, it
would be far from clear whether we should call it a metaphor. But to begin
with the first question:
The *tertium comparationis* between Sally and a block of ice is that both are:

- stiff, rather lacking in movements, unresponsive; and tending to make those in their immediate vicinity uncomfortable.

When Searle says that the respect of comparison must not on one side apply only metaphorically or else the account would be circular, he is clearly wrong. As he himself has to concede a bit further down (1977, 97), there is nothing circular about a comparativist account involving second- (or even third- and fourth-) order metaphors, that is, metaphors that are to be explained in terms of another metaphor, and so on, provided that eventually we get down to some literal comparison. (In fact, Searle’s own theory allows that our associative move from one term to another might be metaphorical and thus in need of a further explanation.) So, should one protest that Sally need not literally be stiff and lacking in motion, that would only be an objection if no relevant similarity existed between emotional and physical stiffness. But here we find the literal *tertium comparationis* of the easiness, amount and rapidity of change (of emotional state on the one hand, and of bodily position on the other). Anyway, it is unlikely that someone aptly described as a block of ice would be jumpy and fidgety, or show a lot of facial movement. You pay her a compliment, say, or tell a joke, and she doesn’t even give you the hint of a smile: that is, her face remains as immobile as if it were frozen.

Against the suggestion that like Sally a block of ice is unresponsive, Searle (1977, 97) objects that a bonfire is similarly unresponsive, although ‘Sally is a bonfire’ has an entirely different meaning. Yet for one thing, this is taken care of by the other points I listed: a bonfire is constantly in motion and quite pleasant to dwell near to. For another thing, although there are of course various respects in which a bonfire is indeed unresponsive (e.g., it doesn’t answer any questions), unresponsiveness is not one of its salient features, as there are many things to which it responds immediately (unlike a block of ice), like a change of wind, a heavy shower, or a resupply of tinder. (And again, it is not an objection that Sally and a block of ice are unresponsive to different things or in different ways, as long as there is an obvious similarity between different kinds of unresponsiveness. Likewise with mental and physical discomfort.)
Perhaps Searle would protest that the list of similarities I presented was too difficult to find:

The very fact that it takes so much ingenuity to think it up makes it unlikely that it is the underlying principle of the metaphorical interpretation, inasmuch as the metaphor is obvious. (Searle 1977, 98)

But the compliment would be undeserved: the similarities I stated are perfectly salient features of a block of ice, which it takes no ingenuity to find. Moreover, as Searle himself notes, metaphorical descriptions of temperament in terms of temperature are as old as the hills and quite conventional. Hence the understanding of the metaphor has become unnecessary for an understanding of what it conveys in an utterance: one may just have learnt it as a convention that ‘cold’ can mean: unresponsive, unemotional &c.

Consider another example given by Searle:

(47) I am in a black mood.

Again, this is clearly not an original metaphor, but an idiomatic expression. The question remains if it can be explained in terms of similarity: between gloominess and the colour black. Obviously, there is a general association of black and dark with things bad, threatening or evil, whereas bright, light and white are figuratively used to stand for what is good. This general schema is based on our natural responses and attitudes towards light and darkness. We tend to be afraid, or at any rate more apprehensive and on our guard in the dark; and rightly so, for where we cannot see much we are less able to avoid or defend ourselves against possible dangers (accidents or enemies likely to take cover in the dark). And whereas we tend to be elated and in good spirits on a bright sunny day, the black of darkness is likely to be felt as rather depressing or gloomy. Thus to call dangerous or depressing things ‘black’ is based on the fact that darkness (which looks black) is typically felt to be dangerous or depressing. This is a fairly straightforward similarity. However, in many figurative uses of the word ‘black’, including (47), the exploitation of such fundamental similarity is combined with metonymical shifts. Thus my black mood is not, like a black night, something that makes me gloomy, for it is my being gloomy – a metonymical shift from cause to effect.
So although (47) involves more than the usual metaphorical twist, it is again no example on which Searle could rest his claim that some metaphors are not based on similarity. Can we find a more suitable example of what he has in mind? Imagine the letter ‘e’ was, for no particular reason, commonly associated with the colour yellow. Now someone could say:

(48) My name contains two yellow letters.

– conveying that his name was spelled with two ‘e’s. Should that be called a metaphor?

The term ‘metaphor’ is somewhat ambiguous. It is commonly used in two quite different senses: either to denote one specific trope, or figure of speech, as opposed to others, such as metonymy, hyperbole, litotes; or the word is used broadly and loosely to include all those, denoting any non-literal use of language (where understanding requires more than understanding of literal utterance meaning). The disadvantages of the inclusive use of the term are obvious: If we call all those tropes ‘metaphors’, we will have to introduce a new word for metaphors that are not metonymies, hyperboles &c. Moreover, if we take or define metaphors to be such a mixed bag, we should not be at all certain to find one explanation of how all metaphors work: different types of figurative expressions are likely to require rather different explanations. Anyway, to avoid misunderstanding I shall use the term ‘metaphor’ only in its specific sense. To indicate the word’s inclusive sense I shall use the expression ‘metaphor-&-all-that’. Accordingly,

(49) I haven’t seen you for ages.

and

(50) Oxford elected a new Chancellor.

are instances of metaphor-&-all-that, but, being a hyperbole and a metonymy respectively, they are not metaphors.

Searle attempts to give an account of metaphor-&-all-that. He explicitly includes hyperbole and metonymy in his analysis (‘Principles 1 & 8’), and it is obvious that it also applies to irony: The crucial point for Searle is that there is some ‘principle of association’ by which one gets from what is
literally said (and as such somehow defective) to what is figuratively conveyed. And of course in the case of irony there is the association of opposites, that directs me for instance from

(51) You’re very punctual.

when obviously I am not, to:

(52) You’re late.

This inclusion of irony, it seems to me, stretches even the broad sense of metaphor-&-all-that. I do not think any careful speaker would describe an ironical utterance of (51) as metaphorical. And there are even more unsuitable phenomena that Searle by his account would have to classify as metaphors-&-all-that (or could exclude only arbitrarily): When Bertie Wooster uses the word ‘Stilton’ as a facetious sobriquet to refer to Darcy Cheesewright, he obviously exploits an ‘association in our minds’ between a man called Cheesewright and a kind of cheese; yet one would hardly call this a metaphor in any sense of the word. Nor would one take this category to include Cockney rhyming slang, even though it is based on salient verbal associations (e.g., ‘loaf’ ⇒ ‘loaf of bread’ ⇒ ‘head’).

Be that as it may, there is a fundamental flaw in Searle’s criticism of the comparison view for not being able to account for figurative expressions not based on any similarity: It is motivated by the consideration of a markedly different use of the term to be explained, and so has no force. The defender of the comparison view takes ‘metaphor’ in the specific sense, for a trope based on similarity, and not for tropes based on contiguity (metonymy), exaggeration (hyperbole), understatement (litotes), inversion (irony), or any other form of association; whereas Searle uses ‘metaphor’ broadly to include all these other forms – and then complains that the comparison view fails to explain everything falling under that broader concept. That is, he accuses the comparison view of failing to explain what it is not meant to explain. To put it differently: if the comparison view provides a satisfactory explanation of what everyone calls a metaphor (and we saw that Searle has offered no plausible arguments to deny that), but turns out not to be applicable to some figurative expressions, which need to be explained differently – that is a good reason not to call these expres-
sions by the same name. We should not adopt Searle’s indiscriminate usage of ‘metaphor’ (as metaphor-&-all-that) since it is likely to prevent us from appreciating the rather different ways in which different figures of speech work: some are based on similarity, others are not. Hence (48) should not be classified as a metaphor.

9. While Searle thinks that only some metaphors cannot be spelt out as literal comparisons, Robert Fogelin argues that no metaphors can be understood as literal comparisons. According to Fogelin (1988, 29f.), metaphors are elliptical similes, that is: figurative comparisons. The difference between literal and figurative comparisons he explains as follows: ‘A is like B’ is literally true if and only if ‘A has a sufficiently large number of B’s salient features’ (ibid., 78). But taken as a figurative comparison, ‘A is like B’ can be true even if the majority of B’s salient features are evidently incongruous with A. The figurative comparison calls forth an adjustment: ‘the respondent now prunes the feature space [provided by “B”] of the falsifying features’ (ibid., 89). Thus,

(53) Margaret Thatcher is like a bulldozer.

– is literally false, because Mrs Thatcher is not a machine that moves huge quantities of dirt. Still, it could well be true if taken figuratively (ibid., 87f.). As an example of a literally true comparison Fogelin offers:

(54) A road grader is like a bulldozer.

– Of course it is understandable that Fogelin wants to treat (53) and (54) as different kinds of comparisons. The resemblance between a bulldozer and a grader is much more obvious and pronounced than that between a bulldozer and Mrs Thatcher. However, for one thing, the extent and salience of resemblance is a matter of degree. Think of (39), the comparison of an adult to a child: By Fogelin’s criterion, one would have to call this a figurative comparison, although it may draw attention to a perfectly straightforward and obvious behavioural similarity, very different from the similarity alleged between Mrs Thatcher and a bulldozer. So (39) lies somewhere between (53) and (54); but it seems somewhat odd to treat the difference between literal and figurative truth as one of degree. (And should it really be required for a literal comparison that A has a sufficiently large number of B’s salient properties? What if it’s only a small number of over-
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wholly salient features? Anyway, it seems rather unclear how properties are to be individuated and counted.)

For another thing, even if one accepted Fogelin’s proposed analysis of ‘A is (literally) like B’, and labelled as ‘figurative’ any such comparison that, although not altogether false, does not involve a sufficiently large number of the salient features of B (the object of comparison) – that would not provide any obstacle to the comparison view of metaphor. The crucial point is one that Fogelin does not deny, namely that even in cases like (53) there is a real resemblance at issue, be it ever so abstract or accompanied by salient dissimilarities. Hence even if (53) wasn’t yet to count as a properly literal paraphrase of the corresponding metaphor:

(55) Margaret Thatcher is a bulldozer.

– this could still be literally paraphrased by some other statement of similarity, perhaps:

(56) Margaret Thatcher is in some respects like a bulldozer.

Here the expression ‘in some respects’ makes clear what Fogelin is concerned about: that it is not a straightforward and fully salient likeness. Or even more explicitly:

(57) There is a resemblance between Margaret Thatcher and a bulldozer, although only very few of a bulldozer’s salient features can be attributed to Mrs Thatcher.

10. Finally, it has been protested against the analysis of metaphors as condensed comparisons that the content of a metaphor, unlike that of a non-figurative comparison, is essentially open-ended. It is not surprising that Davidson should regard metaphors as inexhaustible. If metaphorical content were not a matter of meaning, but of free association, then of course no boundaries could be drawn: anything might spring to someone’s mind when hearing or reading a metaphor. However, it is exactly this lack

12 Although he does not offer this as a criterion to distinguish metaphors from literal discourse (Davidson 1978, 263, n. 17).
of standards of correctness that makes Davidson’s account so implausible, even with regard to poetic examples. Consider:

(58) Where care lodges, sleep will never lie.

The meaning of this metaphor is very clear and determinate: Sleep and care are compared to two people the first of which does not like to stay in the same lodgings as the second, and the lodgings are obviously an image for a person. So, in plain language, being worried prevents a person from finding any sleep. There is very little temptation to press the image further. Of course one could do so – Do the two choose different lodgings at different times? What happens if they meet in the street? And why does the one shun the other? Did they have a quarrel in the past? How old are they? Are they male or female? &c. – but it’s quite clear that any such further details are perfectly irrelevant to the simple point made by (58). One should not forget that what can be expressed metaphorically are not only profound thoughts, but also the most humdrum observations – for instance, that worry prevents people from sleep.

Perhaps a more promising example, that has often been cited by those who like to extol the inexhaustible implications of metaphors, is this (Romeo & Juliet, II.ii.3):

(59) Juliet is the sun.

Stanley Cavell explains:

Romeo means that Juliet is the warmth of his world; that his day begins with her; that only in her nourishment can he grow. And his declaration suggests that the moon, which other lovers use as emblems of their love, is merely her reflected light, and dead in comparison; and so on. […] The ‘and so on’ which ends my example of paraphrase is significant. It registers what William Empson calls the ‘pregnancy’ of metaphors, the burgeoning of meaning in them. Call it what you like; in this feature metaphors differ from some, but perhaps not all, literal discourse. And differ from the similar device of simile […]. (Cavell 1965, 78f.)

It seems to me that what Cavell here celebrates as semantic ‘pregnancy’ is more commonly, and less misleadingly, called – vagueness. And far from
being a mark to distinguish metaphors from similes, it is readily explained by the fact that metaphors basically are similes. As such they stand in need of some respects of comparison, which, if not named by the speaker, must be drawn from the context or from what is (assumed to be) common knowledge (or belief) about the objects compared. Now, the supposed phenomenon of semantic ‘pregnancy’ arises when the speaker, or author, and context give us only a rough idea of the intended respects of comparison, yet off our own bat we can think of various more specific respects that would appear to fit well (although we have no reason to believe that the speaker had any particular ones in mind). Similarly, when being told merely of ‘a banquet’, all we know is that this would involve some uncommonly elaborate food and fine drink, probably wine, yet we can imagine a number of particular dishes and vintages that would fit the occasion. The meaning is vague and general, it takes our imagination to fill in some details, and of course there’s no end to what we could think of. It should be clear, then, that what an indeterminate metaphor is open-endedly pregnant with is not its meaning, but what could be imagined in order to enrich that meaning. When listing such details, we’re not expounding the metaphor, but developing it further.

Those who praise metaphors for being open-ended are likely to respond that the case is different from other types of vagueness in that metaphors actually invite us to use our imagination to supplement further details. In poetry that may indeed sometimes, or often, be the case; but the products of our imagination are not, for that matter, part of the metaphors’ linguistic meaning. The following sentence may occur in a fictional narrative:

(60) They had a banquet that night, and you may imagine what delicious food and exquisite wines they enjoyed.

Here you’re explicitly invited to fill in the details the author omitted. You may think of salmon with asparagus and Chablis for a starter; but it’s clearly not part of the linguistic meaning of (60) that the banqueters had salmon with asparagus and Chablis for a starter. Although, to be sure, when commenting on the passage one may give that as a suitable example of a banquet’s fare. Likewise, imaginative developments of poetic metaphors are not out of place in literary criticism, but they should not be re-
garded as explications of metaphorical meaning (or only in the sense in which the example of a lion may serve to elucidate the general phrase ‘some wild beast’).

Now, finally, let us take a closer look at (59): Juliet and the sun. First, it should be noted that in itself this is anything but a subtle and original metaphor, it is (and was) simply a derivative of a cliché, a derivative that had itself long become conventional. The cliché is the metaphorical association of beauty and light, or brightness, easily comparable as the agreeable sides on two scales (we prefer beauty to ugliness as we prefer light to darkness; cf. (47) above). In Shakespeare’s times the metaphor was so conventional that ‘beautiful’ could be taken as one of the meanings of the word ‘bright’. Then the sun, as the superlative of brightness, would obviously have been a ready image for outstanding beauty. Shakespeare found it used in Arthur Brooke’s version of *Romeo and Juliet* (1562), and the way he put it in his own play seems to have been inspired also by a similar passage in Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta* (1589). Shakespeare’s (59) is a thoroughly conventional, if not hackneyed, metaphor – rather like the comparison of one’s love to a flower. So it is rather curious to see how many philosophers have chosen this example to illustrate the richness and profundity of metaphors: the endless ‘burgeoning of meaning’ – in a cliché.

Of course there’s no harm in Cavell’s imaginative exercises. Indeed, one may enjoy that kind of game. However, the aesthetic value of (59) in Shakespeare’s play has very little to do with its alleged richness in mean-

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13 ‘3. Of persons: “Resplendent with charms” (J.); beautiful, fair. arch. [...] a1300 *Havelok* 2131 In his armes his brithe bride. c1420 *Sir Amadace* lviii, That ladi gente That was so bryte of ble. c1460 in *Babees Bk.* (1868) 15 In chambur among ladyes bryth. 1593 SHAKES. *Lucr.* 490 By thy bright beauty was it newly bred. 1605 *Macb.* IV.iii.22 Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell.’ (*OED*)

14 ‘For eche of them to other is, as to the world, the sunne’, *The Tragicall Historye of Romeo and Juliet*; quoted from Blakemore Evans 1984, 92.

15 ‘But stay, what starre shines yonder in the East? / The Loadstarre of my Life, if Abigail’ (II.i.40f.).

16 At least Cavell refrains from throwing in anachronisms, like the idea that the earth revolves round the sun, suggested by Lynne Tirrell (1991, 338, 341), to whom ‘Juliet is the sun’ is ‘a new, somewhat obscure metaphor’!
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ing. Much more important are the witty way this intrinsically trite metaphor is introduced and developed in the scene (II.ii), and the way the image serves as a recurrent theme in the play, providing leitmotivic links between different passages. At night in Capulet’s orchard Romeo approaches the house and suddenly sees a light in one of the windows (II.ii.2f.):

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

He guesses that it is Juliet’s room:

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

The image is charmingly apropos as it is occasioned by the appearance of a real light, an ordinary candle, that through the thought that it is held by Juliet is transformed into the biggest light of all, appearing in the east, and then becoming Juliet herself. The idea of Juliet as a light to outshine other lights was already introduced when Romeo first saw her (I.v.43):

O she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

Next, in the balcony scene, the image is set in opposition to the moon, that is actually visible to Romeo (II.ii.4ff.):

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.

As a virgin, Juliet is a votary of Diana, the goddess of the moon and patroness of chastity. So Romeo uses the sun metaphor to lead on, via some Roman mythology, to a discreet expression of his sexual desires:

Be not her maid […].

Presently the idea of Juliet’s beauty turning night into day is playfully developed with some fanciful details (II.ii.15-22):

Two of the fairest stars in the heaven […].
What if her eyes were there, they in her head?
The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,
As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night.

Juliet, later, returns the metaphorical compliment (III.ii.17):

Come, Night, come, Romeo, come, thou day in night [...].

And she too indulges in some extravagant variations on this old metaphorical theme; though her idea may not be to everybody’s taste (III.ii.21-25):

Give me my Romeo, and when he shall die,  
Take him and cut him out in little stars,  
And he will make the face of heaven so fine  
That all the world will be in love with night,  
And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Finally, Romeo returns to the image when Juliet seems dead (V.iii.84-86):

A grave? O no, a lantern, slaughtered youth;  
For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes  
This vault a feasting presence full of light.

What is to be admired and enjoyed in all this is not a wonderfully profound metaphor, but the way in which an image, in itself quite ordinary and very limited in meaning, is playfully developed to interact with elements of the scene and the plot, and employed to forge links between different scenes.

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Metaphors are implicit comparisons: Outside philosophy this is a platitude, but among contemporary philosophers it has become customary to reject it as piteously naïve, on the basis of a handful of frequently repeated criticisms. I hope to have shown that none of these criticisms carry conviction and that the bad reputation of the common-sense view is quite unfounded.17

17 I am grateful to David Dolby for his comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
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Bibliography