Overcoming Our Childhood: 
Metaphors and the History of Philosophy

PRELUDE

Plato’s dialogue, the *Critias*, has an elaborate description of the country of Atlantis, a country that perished nine thousand years before Socrates, who heard about it from his grandfather. The dialogue has seldom been read, probably because we have had only small fragments of it, none of which contains any philosophy. Very recently however, in the *Journal of Undiscovered Manuscripts* (2001), we have a new report of the full dialogue which turns out to be primarily about the very early Atlantis philosopher Otalp.

Otalp, perhaps because dance was a highly appreciated art form in Atlantis, compared thinking to dancing. In one of his dialogues called the Odeaph (it now appears Plato borrowed the dialogue form from Atlantis), he claims:

There are two classes of dance: the physical and the Astral. The physical is performed by the body, while the Astral is performed by the Astral body. Just as the physical dance exists only when and while the dancer is dancing, so what is thought exists only when there is thinking. Just as no one can dance my dance for me, my Astral dance can be performed only by my Astral body. (79a)

This comparison raised so many questions that Otalp’s approach determined the history of philosophy in Atlantis for thousands of years. Among the many disputes was the question of whether the Astral body was composed only of legs, since they are the essential feature of dancing, or whether there was a complete body including internal organs which performed the thinking. An even more impassioned debate was whether there was an Astral floor to which the dancing feet were attracted by Astral gravity, or whether the body, being Astral, was suspended in space – Astral space, of course.

In the *Critias*, Plato (or is that Socrates?) refuses to support any of the sides in this debate in Atlantis. Instead, he questions whether the assimilation of thinking to dancing was useful in the first place. He proposes instead to try a quite different metaphor. But before we examine the metaphor Plato himself proposes, we need to look at the nature of metaphor in general.
PART I: METAPHORICAL THINKING

The O.E.D. defines a metaphor as a figure of speech:

Metaphor: the figure of speech in which in a name or descriptive phrase is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable. (OED)

If I say, “Mary Walsh is a star,” I am using the word star metaphorically. The phrase is convenient shorthand for something I could say literally, at some length. I mean that Mary Walsh stands out from a large number of other actors as someone who catches our attention, just like literal stars stand out in the night sky. Max Black might call it a “substitution metaphor” in the sense that I could easily substitute a literal phrase with the same meaning (Black 71). Metaphors such as these, which are the kind the O.E.D. is defining, are of a purely verbal and superficial nature; they have little effect on our thinking.

Mac Cormac, on the other hand, claims there are three levels of metaphor: surface language, semantics and syntax, and cognition. The star example counts as a surface language metaphor. Cognitive metaphors influence not just how we speak but how we think. It is exclusively the cognitive level of metaphor that I will be discussing in this paper and in particular those cognitive metaphors which Mac Cormac labels “basic metaphors” – the metaphors which determined the fundamental basis of our thought.

A cognitive metaphor places a word or concept in a new context or frame of interpretation. As Black puts it, the “mode of operation [of metaphors] requires the reader to use a system of implications ... as a means for selecting, emphasizing, and organizing relations in a different field.” (Black 79) We can think of it as a screen or filter. “We can say that the principal subject is seen through the metaphorical expression – or, if we prefer, that the principal subject is 'projected upon' the field of the subsidiary subject.” (Black 75)

Suppose I am set the task of describing a battle in words drawn as largely as possible from the vocabulary of chess. These latter terms determine a system of implications which will proceed to control my description of the battle. The enforced choice of the chess vocabulary will lead some aspects of the battle to be emphasized, others to be neglected, and all to be organized in a way that would cause much more strain in other modes of description. The chess vocabulary filters and transforms: it not only selects, it brings forward aspects of the battle that might not be seen at all through another medium. (Black 75.)

While the metaphorical concepts are organized into a new framework, and their criteria of relevance may be very different from the case of the principal subject, the framework and criteria will only occasionally be explicit. Usually, and for the most part, they will be left implicit in the kind of meaning structure that Husserl refers to as a “horizon.” Indeed, we may not even notice that we are using a metaphor at all. The new framework will raise novel questions, indeed an indefinitely large number of novel questions, some of which may suggest fruitful lines of inquiry, while others may lead us into blind alleys.
Let us look at a couple of other examples. If I say that students are sentenced to four years in a University, I call up an authoritarian frame of reference – that of a prison – in which students are told what to do by professors. If on the other hand I speak of the University offering a menu of courses, I invoke the restaurant frame of reference. Without explicitly saying so, I place the student in the role of consumer with the power to make choices and the professor in a serving role as waiter or cook. Among the fruitful questions it might raise is whether the professor, like a gourmet cook, is skilled at delivering tasty courses. One could also inquire what the menu would be like if it were translated into Tibetan, but while this remains a valid possibility, it would usually be highly irrelevant. One might also be led to ask whether, at the end of a course, a student should give the professor a tip. That’s surely an example of a blind alley.

A metaphor, then, should not be understood as a kind of discovery that one thing is like another. As Davidson puts it, “Everything is like everything, and in endless ways.” (Davidson 254) A metaphor is a creative inspiration to our thought, an invitation to ask new questions, a proposal for new kinds of investigation, a task we lay out before ourselves. Like any project it can lead us far astray if we don’t pay attention to what we’re doing, especially if we don’t realize that we’re using a metaphor in the first place.

**PART II: PHILOSOPHICAL METAPHORS**

Western philosophy is the development of a cluster of interrelated metaphors. (That, of course, is a metaphor, so this is a project I’m proposing.) The most central of these is the optical metaphor which is developed by Socrates in the Phaedo. First, speaking literally, Socrates distinguishes between these concrete objects [e.g., horses] you can touch and see and perceive by your other senses, [and] those constant entities [e.g., equality] you cannot possibly apprehend except by thinking; they are invisible to our sight. ... we should assume two classes of things, one visible and the other invisible. (79a)

He slips quickly, however, from the literal sense of seeing to a metaphorical one:

Observation by means of the eye and ears and all the other senses is entirely deceptive ... because such objects are sensible and visible but what the soul itself sees is intelligible and invisible. (83ab)

There are a number of interrelated metaphors at work here. Plato assimilates abstract qualities such as equality to our everyday notion of “thing,” for instance, but let us leave that metaphor aside for a moment. I want to focus first on his use of sight as a metaphor for thinking.

Visual perception brings with it a frame with certain elements: There is the object seen, the eye which sees, and the perceiving relationship between them – seeing:

- The seen object is experienced as separate from and independent of the seeing; as the Latin etymology – ob-jectum – suggests, the object is out in front of me, at a distance, present before me. It also has a temporal independence from me in that it was there before I looked at it, and will continue to be there.
when I look away. It escapes my personal possession in that it is equally perceivable by others.

- The eye which does the seeing is independent of any particular seen object and remains the same whatever object it perceives.
- The seeing relationship between them is a passive one in that the eye does not create the object but subordinates itself to the object in a receptive manner.

Each of these elements gives rise to a series of subordinate metaphors, as I will explain below.

The use of sight as a metaphor for thinking, once created and established by Plato, becomes the dominant metaphor of Western philosophy and reverberates throughout our history to such a point that its status as a metaphor becomes invisible.

Watch how easy it is, for instance, for Descartes to follow the same well-worn path as he examines the perception of a piece of wax (in the *Meditations*). First he states that he judges, rather than sees, the nature of the wax to be extension. But only a few sentences later, he claims it “is perceived by the mind alone. ... the perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination ... but of purely mental scrutiny [inspectio in Latin].” Soon he is questioning all visible objects: “what was it about them that I perceived clearly? Just that the ideas, or thoughts, of such things appeared before my mind.” (*Second Meditation*, 85, 87)

Three centuries later, Husserl, too, in discussing “the right of autonomous reason ... to judge rationally or scientifically about things” slips within one page into interpreting such judgment as a kind of vision:

*Immediate “seeing,” not merely sensuous, experiential seeing, but seeing in the universal sense as an originally presentive consciousness of any kind whatever, is the ultimate legitimizing source of all rational assertions. ... If we see an object with full clarity ... if we then see (this being a new mode of “seeing”) how the object is, the faithful expressive statement has, as a consequence, its legitimacy. Not to assign any value to “I see it” as an answer to the question, “Why?” would be a counter-sense, as, yet again, we see. (*Ideas I*, Para 19, Kersten trans. 36-37 – all Husserl’s own italicizing and quotation marks.)*

The metaphorical use of seeing, then, is central to Western philosophy over the course of most of its history. But the metaphorical use of any term, as I have explained, drags in with it a frame of interpretation involving other, interrelated concepts and questions. I would like first to look at the metaphorical use of “object seen.” Later I will look at the notion of the eye.

In ordinary, everyday seeing, we look at objects or things – I use the terms interchangeably. Note for contrast that this is not, in general, true of smell. It is possible that some other animals have the experience of simply smelling objects, but humans tend to experience a smell and ask ourselves about the cause of it. In vision, however, we seldom experience a sensation of light and ask ourselves what the cause was. We simply experience seen objects directly. Thus, when we approach thinking with the metaphor of seeing, the new frame of interpretation naturally inclines us to expect something analogous to the seen object. Socrates refers to
what we think of as “constant entities ... invisible to sight,” such as equality. The metaphor implies that these abstract entities have by default many of the properties of seen objects: separation from me, independence of me, existence before and after my thinking of it, availability to others, etc.

How exactly such properties can be made to work in the metaphorical world has intrigued philosophers since Plato. Platonism (though maybe not Plato himself) accepts that such abstract objects have the properties of independence, existence and availability while stripping them of spatial properties, of change in time and of (literal) visibility – eternal Platonic Eide. This gives rise to new questions. How do the abstract objects relate to the concrete objects of visual perception? The relations of “participation” and “imitation” are invented to answer this question. Whatever other problems Otalp encountered with his metaphor of the dance, at least he didn’t have to deal with these questions.

Cartesians, in contrast to Plato, strip off the property of independence and place the thought-of object, the “idea,” within the mind itself, as part of mental substance. But now we have to ask how these objects within the mind relate to the physical objects of vision. The answer to this question is no longer “participation” but “representation,” although this concept is no less problematic. Exactly how representations succeed in representing has given rise to an industry which has employed philosophers for three centuries. One thing has become clear: “Representation” cannot be taken literally, either in its political sense of delegation, or in its artistic sense as an image which duplicates an original. Representationalism is a subsidiary metaphor generated by the questions raised by the original, optical metaphor. For all their difficulties with Astral gravity, the philosophers of Atlantis never have to deal with the convolutions of theories of representation.

One of the offshoots of representationalism is a dualistic approach to the philosophy of language. To say that a word has a meaning, in this approach, is to hypothesize behind the word a second mental object, the idea, representation, or mental state which the word expresses. This obsession with the concept “object,” or “thing,” follows naturally from the optical metaphor in a way that it would not follow if our basic metaphor were based on smelling or dancing. “If my only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” (The thesis that the Western obsession with interpreting all phenomena as things or substances is based on the optical metaphor is defended in my earlier Colloquium paper in 1995, “Individuality: Essence, Horizon and Language,” which can be found on my website.)

Apart from the need for an object seen, the optical metaphor requires that there be an eye doing the seeing. Since the object of thought is invisible, and the seeing is metaphorical, the optical frame of interpretation raises the question whether there is some invisible eye of thought. Plato, in the quotations above, proposes that there is an eye of the mind, the soul. Which features of the eye does the I have? Clearly it doesn’t need to have legs (after all it’s not a dancer), nor any other spatial properties. But it is still separate from the objects thought, is independent of them, and receptive of them. Even in the Cartesian version, where the objects thought are within the mind, there is some distinction between the ego cogitans and the ideas. Later, Husserl distinguishes the empirical ego from the spontaneously self-constituting transcendental ego.
Before the arrival of the optical metaphor there were of course thinkers such as Thales and Pythagoras. Both these were human beings, visible to others. What the metaphor introduces is a soul or Subject over and beyond the human person with whom we interact in an everyday manner. The Subject is the pure power of “seeing” and makes sense only within the frame of reference of the metaphor. Once the metaphor is challenged, the subject no longer has a leg to stand on.

The metaphorical scheme can be pursued indefinitely. Since we cannot see in the dark, is there some kind of invisible light to allow the invisible I to see the invisible object? Ah! Maybe the form of the Good is like the sun. And since the sun makes the plants it shines on grow, as well as making them visible, what does the invisible sun do to the invisible objects of thought? Ah! “Their very existence and essence is derived to them from it.” At which point in the discussion even Plato feels required to comment: “And Glauccon very ludicrously said, Heaven save us, hyperbole can no further go.” (Republic, VI 509c) If Glauccon has been around two thousand years later to hear Descartes identify the Natural Light with God, I expect he would have split his sides with laughter.

Despite Glauccon’s laughter ringing down the ages, it is not until well into the 20th-century that philosophers, working from a number of different traditions, such as Derrida (continental), Sellars and Rorty (analytic) and Dennett (naturalism), have made explicit the metaphor behind the notion that thinking should be conceived of as the presence of an inner or abstract object to a viewing subject. The enchantment has been broken and we are now free to consider other ways to discuss the nature of thinking. My point is not primarily that the optical metaphor had a monopoly on Western philosophy – indeed there were other metaphors at play (consider act and agency) – but rather that we should view the history of philosophy as largely the working out of more and more intricate questions proposed by basic metaphors. “As the twig is bent, so grows the tree.” If Plato had chosen to discuss thinking by means of the metaphor of smelling, of dancing, or of speaking (as Rorty does), rather than of seeing, our history would have been very different indeed.

**PART III: PROBLEM: MYTH AND TRUTH**

But would it have been more valid?

It is tempting to say, as Mac Cormac does, that, when philosophical reflection fails to recognize a metaphor as metaphorical, a myth is created. Platonism, i.e., the claim that abstractions are objects, would then be a myth because the optical object metaphor on which it is based goes unrecognized. But, Mac Cormac claims, if we are not to declare all philosophy and indeed all thought to be mythological, this position assumes that below metaphors there is a literal layer, and it is here that real truth is to be found. Further, if we view the history of philosophy as the elaboration of metaphors, must we not then say that earlier, less metaphorical positions, are closer to the truth? But is this plausible? Could we do an ontological deconstruction which could lead us back down through the cave of layered metaphors to that primordial moment when the black cow steps out from the forest of the night into the clearing where the sunlight reveals its bovine truth for the first time? If we cannot point to something literal, does the notion of metaphorical not vanish due to vacuous contrast? If there is no literal truth, are we not left with metaphors all the way down?
PART IV: SOLUTION: EVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

I suggest we can overcome this dilemma by avoiding black and white thinking and instead adopting a gradualist, evolutionary approach.

Let’s look at how evolution unfolds. If Mother Nature were a master designer who thought through her plans from scratch, then when a new niche appears a species adapted to the niche would be engineered rationally from the ground up. For example, if a niche appears for a flying creature, then Mother Nature would wait millions of years until some random genetic mutation grew wings on the back of, say, a horse. The result would be Pegasus, a four-footed horse with wings. But Mother Nature is not a human engineer with a master design. She is more like a tinker who cobbles together some minor innovation from whatever materials are hanging around. This is the process that Dennett refers to with the French term “Bicolage” (225). When the opportunity appeared, perhaps 60 million years ago, the forelimbs of some dinosaurs changed gradually into wings. So nowadays what we actually have are birds. I’m sure many a reflective bird-philosopher has cursed Mother Nature for the absence of arms, which would have been so useful for dealing with the world. Surely any rational designer with a good master plan would have seen how useful it would be to have wings as well as forelimbs. The ubiquitous feature of biological evolution, as Dennett points out, is the principle that “local rules generate global order.” (223, borrowing from Kauffman.) Nature produces birds not Pegasus’.

If we think of language as itself an evolutionary tool for dealing with the world, we can assume then that when it first evolved, perhaps a hundred thousand years ago, it too was cobbled together from vocal, aural, and mental functions which originally played other roles. And, of more relevance to our current project, when, within language, a new linguistic need or opportunity arose, language would evolve by taking advantage of whatever capacities it had already developed. Thus, metaphor should not be seen as an extraordinary, unique, or novel departure but as the continuation of an approach endemic to nature. A limb, a tool, a technique, or form of expression, originally adapted to one purpose, gets pressed into service opportunistically to fulfill a new one.

This way of looking at metaphor allows us to interpret in an interesting way the relationship between an old structure and a new structure. It would make little sense to think of wings as a metaphorical way of dealing with the world, whereas the dinosaur’s forelimbs were the literal way. Grasping the history of evolution enables us to understand why a bird has no front claws, but we don’t have to assume that the earlier structure was superior to the later, nor vice versa. There is no privilege to anteriority nor to posteriority. We need to investigate each feature independently with respect to its own niche to discover how successfully it relates to the world.

Language, and the development of basic metaphors, are ways that we deal with the world, so any sharp distinction between the literal and the metaphorical can be obliterated. As we climb back down the beanstalk of metaphors, we do not eventually stand safely on the solid ground of literality. Rather, we burrow down into the prelinguistic dirt of biological adaptations. (If ontogenesis recapitulates phylogensis, then we should not
be surprised that Freud and Lacan propose that babies develop words as substitutes for the presence or absence of their mothers. Words are metaphorical substitutes for desire.) If we go back in the history of metaphors, in the history of language, we come not to some ultimate, prelinguistic presence of being, but to a biological organism dealing with the world. Merleau-Ponty claims that the origin of words is to be found in bodily gesture. We could try to say, rather clumsily, that all language is a metaphor based on our literal interaction with the environment, but this would be as unsatisfactory as describing a bird’s wing as a metaphor for a dinosaur’s forelimb. Metaphorical language and literal language are not fundamentally different: they are both evolutionary adaptations which allow us to deal with our environment.

CONCLUSION

The way to individual freedom and enlightenment passes through the analysis of our own childhood. Those who do not study their childhood have little hope of understanding their adult character. But this is not to glorify childhood. Only a crazed romantic would search for the answers to adult questions in the babbling of children. We analyze our childhood in order to escape from it. Yet total freedom from our childhood is just as crazy and romantic a notion. The desire to escape, like the power to analyze, is itself a product of that same childhood. The most we can hope for is a spiral of dialectical bootstrapping.

As philosophy matures from its infancy, it is frequently tempted to forget its childhood and begin afresh. Descartes and Husserl make much of their new beginnings in philosophy, of the idea that we can discard our history and start again from scratch, yet they are among the philosophers who most obviously are trapped into working out the implications of the optical metaphor they inherited from their ancestors. When once, in the childhood of philosophy, a metaphor is adopted, it gets taken for granted, becomes commonplace, and lays out a series of ever more intricate investigative questions which appear to be reasonable only because we are prisoners of a certain picture. For those not ensnared in the metaphor, or for those who have different metaphorical agendas, these questions may end up appearing, as Glaucón put it, ludicrous. It would be nice to believe, with St. Paul, that “When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” Unfortunately, the pursuit of metaphor in philosophy can lead us to become even more childish in our old age.

The danger is not metaphor itself; it is unrecognized metaphor. Metaphors have the potential to be inspiring, to raise new questions and suggest new lines of investigation. We can no more escape metaphors than we can escape language. It is when, with hubris, we think of our metaphor as the one and only, absolute way that we get led astray. Our best hope is to reflect upon our ancestors’ metaphors and consider whether they are appropriate to our own situation. If we don’t reflect upon and understand the historical origin of our inherited metaphors we remain trapped in the childhood of philosophy. As Rorty, who insists so strongly on the study of the history of philosophy, puts it: “Just as the [psychiatric] patient needs to relate to his past to answer his questions, so philosophy needs to relate to its past in order to answer its questions.” (PMN 33)
“No doubt metaphors are dangerous—and perhaps especially so in philosophy. But a prohibition against their use would be a willful and harmful restriction upon our powers of inquiry.” (Black 79.)

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