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The real significance of metaphor: Lucian Blaga and Michael Polanyi

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Abstract Metaphors are taken to be 'figures of speech' which apply the terms for one known object to another. They can be used to show or argue that what applies to the one also applies to the second. But this ignores the Lucian Blaga's important distinction between such 'plastic' metaphors and 'revelatory' ones which articulate for both the discoverer and for his audience something radically new for which there is no word. This relies upon our tacit powers, as shown by Piaget and articulated by Michael Polanyi, to adapt our present concepts, categories and language by using them as clues and attending *from* them and *to* what we sense that they point to and which cannot be 'assimilated' to them. A completely new word would articulate and convey nothing, but a word used as a revelatory metaphor can both open up a 'mystery' or 'unknown unknown' and reveal and convey something of it. The work of Blaga, Polanyi and Piaget on epistemology and language is used to explain, with examples, how this is possible and why it is important. Indeed, language grows by means of such metaphors which, if successful, then become 'literal' uses of the words used, and their metaphorical origins are forgotten. The proper understanding of metaphor may require some radical changes in our ideas of language and knowledge.

Keywords: Attending from-to, Lucian Blaga, plus knowledge, minus knowledge, plastic metaphors, revelatory metaphors, Michael Polanyi, Piaget, tacit integration

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Questions about the uses of metaphor in argumentation cannot be properly formulated and answered without a fundamental reappraisal of the meanings and uses of metaphor generally. In turn, that requires an often radical revision of our thinking about language and knowledge in general. In particular, it requires a rejection of the widespread assumption that 'literal' meaning is the norm and that metaphors especially, along with analogies and other 'figures of speech', because they are not meant 'literally', are therefore 'abnormal'. Philosophers have too often uncritically accepted these assumptions and have focused almost exclusively upon supposedly 'literal' uses of language, and above all upon statements of fact intended to communicate information to others. At best they have regarded metaphor as a literary decoration, all right in poetry but less so in the sober prose of philosophy and the sciences. This was particularly manifest in the days when Linguistic or

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Conceptual Analysis was prominent in English-speaking philosophy, and when we were required to 'cash our metaphors', and so to 'spell them out' in plain, literal language. Yet we were never told at which banks and for which coin. Likewise 'language games' curiously never referred to spelling bees, 'Scrabble', 'Lexicon' or crosswords. Nor is this just an example of poking fun at it with a *tu quoque.* Surprisingly, those philosophers seem not actually to have consulted what was supposed to be their Bible, *The Oxford English Dictionary,* nor any other such work which gives a least some indication of the etymology of our words. Otherwise they would have known that most of them originally meant something else: for example, that 'understand' meant 'under stand'; that 'grasp' meant and still means 'grip firmly in the hand'; or, despite the Greek that at least some of them would have learnt, that '*metaphora*' is itself «a carrying from one place to another» (LIDDELL, SCOTT 1958). In short, they failed to realise that genuine metaphor is living language, that cliché is hackneyed metaphor, and that 'literal' language is metaphor so dead (another metaphor) that most people do not realise that once it was alive. For, as will be shown, metaphor is the only way in which something radically new can be said. But then the ruling philosophy was haunted by the spectre of the solipsism of phenomenalism, including G.E. Moore's 'sense data' theory, in which Empiricist philosophy had ended. Consequently, it mistrusted everything that was 'private' and not 'public'. Thus 'meaning' meant publicly observable 'usage'. Therefore it was 'established' or 'current' usage and never what the speaker intended. In turn it entailed that no speaker could add to his language, and so it became a fixed and impersonal affair, independent of those who speak it. Moreover, as Wittgenstein had said, its bounds were the limit of one's world (WITTGENSTEIN 1981). This applied as much to his later account of meaning as 'usage', *public* usage, as to the earlier one of it as 'picturing', because it was also maintained that there could be no thinking without language. Thus we could never speak of that for which we did not already a word, and so we would never been able to search for *les mots justes* for what we were trying to say, nor to adapt current words nor invent new ones. Indeed, we could never know what we wanted to say until we already had spoken the words for it. In a way, that is true, for, as Collingwood argued, the primary use of speech is to articulate what we inchoately feel about something, the full expression of which is art proper[1]. But how would that be possible, without our knowing in some way apart from and prior to speaking them, what the relevant words are? Nor is it enough to say that we learnt them from our parents and others, because that only throws the problem back to the Adam and Eve who uttered the first words. In sum, language and thought on this account could have no history and no future. Miraculously each language would have appeared fully fledged, be simply and unchangeably *there*. Thus it would have been what behaviourists take it to be, a system of mere sounds which automatically act as stimuli to the performance of movements on the part of others, some of which movements would be the production of similar sounds.

As for the use of metaphors in argument, I suggest that metaphors as usually understood, are used to explain something new to the audience in terms already familiar to them. Thus they are like analogies and models, and can be used as part of them. One example is likening the 'flow' of electricity to water and speaking of it as 'a current', which itself was once a metaphor from the Latin *currens*, the present

[1] Art proper is the detailed articulation of felt ideas, whereas most of us content ourselves with exclamations or mere statements about their objects.

participle of *currere*, 'to run', a verb that in English has many metaphorical meanings which are now dead and taken for granted as 'literal'.

Likening the structure of the atom to 'a sun with planets' was another such analogy and model. As for arguments, i.e. inferences, from or by metaphors, they, like ones from or by analogy, and would be from one known example to another.

For examples of this, we need only return to two favourites of Linguistic Analysis: 'cashing metaphors' and 'language games'. Just as a cheque is useless until banked, so metaphors had to be turned into 'ordinary' language to be understood. Also just as a language has its rules and is spoken, so the 'discourses' of the various sciences must have their rules and also are simply 'played', and therefore cannot be criticised from the outside.

Yet the 'concepts' of 'Conceptual' or 'Linguistic Analysis', were more than mere figures of speech and are more like genuine metaphors. For they are alternatives to the earlier 'notions' (late 14th C.) from the past participle of the Latin 'noscere', 'to know', coined by Cicero to translate the Greek 'enoia', 'act of thinking' and '(what is) thought'.

Thus 'concepts' would be 'what is taken in and held' from the Latin 'concipere'; thence 'become pregnant', with the past participle 'conceptus'; next Mediaeval Latin 'conceptum', a 'draft, abstract'; and then in the 1550s 'concept' and meaning what Descartes and Locke were to call 'ideas' though not the original *eidai* of Plato (COLLINGWOOD 1958: 109)[2].

Whether or not those and other inferences from such metaphors are valid, the important point is that, like their analogical forms, these metaphors also consist of one known object spoken of in the terms of another known object, although their use is explanatory and inferential, and not the intensification of an image as with 'literary' ones.

The question of how metaphors can enable us to speak of what has not been spoken of before and which does not fit our prevailing modes of thought, still has to be answered. The general answer was provided by Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* (POLANYI 1958, hereafter 'PK') in its account of the many tacit dimensions of all our activity, language and thinking. In *Meaning*, Polanyi examined the tacit integrations in our understanding of metaphors (POLANY 1975) but only in respect of what is in reality the secondary use and form of metaphor, as a 'figure of speech' in which one known object is spoken of in the terms of another one, and not its primary use and form to say what has never been articulated before.

For the particular answer, we can go to three important books by the most important Romanian philosopher, Lucian Blaga (1895-1961): *Cunoasterea Luciferica* (*Luciferian Knowledge*), *Geneza Metaforei si Sensul Culturii* (*The Genesis of Metaphor and the Meaning of Culture*) and *Stiinti si Creatie* (*Science and Creation*)[3]. It is the second of these which is specifically relevant here, but it

[2] *Online Etymology Dictionary*, etymonline.com. I wonder if 'enoia' is the correct origin, and not 'noésis', 'act of knowing' and 'noéma', '(what is) thought', respectively.

[3] Respectively BLAGA 1933, BLAGA 1937, BLAGA 1942. References to them will be followed by BLAGA 2017, the first English translation in book form of Blaga's philosophy, with page numbers. All of Blaga's major philosophical works, many of which are similar collections of essays with headings rather than numbered chapters, have been republished by Humanitas, Bucharest, since 1990. See also: JONES (2006) which has a good introduction to his whole philosophy. 'Luciferian' refers to the pride and dissatisfaction shown by Lucifer in his rebellion.

presupposes the general epistemology of the former, which has many parallels with Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge*.

Metaphor holds a central place in Blaga's philosophy because it is a cognitional and linguistic corollary of his fundamental distinction between two modes of knowing, poetically entitled 'paradisaic' and 'Luciferian', and later and prosaically as 'Type 1' and 'Type 2'. The former is the relatively confident and untroubled thinking of everyday life and the relatively routine practice of the human and natural sciences, which have their 'known unknowns' or what Blaga calls 'the hiatus unknown', in the form of problems or gaps which they assume that they can eventually solve or fill by the use of their current methods, categories and concepts.

Examples of these are the gaps on a map compiled by aerial photography and so subject to blanks because of patches of cloud cover, or a discrepancy between two documents relating to the same event.

In contrast, 'Luciferian' knowledge opens up a 'mystery', a previously 'unknown unknown', which cannot be understood with existing methods, categories and concepts, but requires new ones (BLAGA 1942, BLAGA 2017: 84-87)[4]. In Piaget's terms, paradisaic knowing is 'assimilation' into our existing intellectual framework of concepts and categories, and Luciferian knowing is 'accommodation' of it so that it can assimilate-something radically new (PIAGET 2001, PIAGET 1973)[5]. The latter also requires, as Polanyi indicated, the essentially tacit ability to grasp that there is something so far unknown *to* which items of present knowledge act as clues as we gropingly attend *from* them and try to grasp their joint meaning. As yet we cannot understand them because they transcend our present categories and concepts and thus our language. Blaga also distinguishes 'minus' knowledge as that use of Luciferian knowing which reduces the scope of existing knowledge by revealing mysteries, as distinct from gaps and problems, which so far remain incomprehensible but which minus knowledge intensifies by showing how they cannot fit our present categories. In contrast 'plus' knowledge adds to knowledge within the existing framework or system of categories and so it attenuates mysteries. As examples of minus knowledge he quotes Wundt on musical chords which are not heard as a set of single notes but as a whole which is more than the sum of its parts, and modern physics which has found that light has a structure both of waves and corpuscles, which were incompatible concepts at the time. These are examples of 'anti-logic' in the terms of the prevailing concepts but which are to be synthesised on a new level into a 'transfigured antimony' by a 'meta-logic', in effect an 'accommodation' or 'adaptation' of the existing concepts and categories so as to be able to assimilate

[4] On 'mystery', see also, BLAGA (2017: 65-69).

[5] Compare Gabriel Marcel on problems to be solved and mysteries in which we are caught up: MARCEL (1949:117). See also PK, Chap. 4, and many of his later publications, on his key distinction between attending *from* subsidiary details now used as clues, and attending *to* the focal comprehensive entity or complex action which they constitute or enable us to apprehend them. With the subsidiary details of the object and its context are included the categories and concepts which we tacitly use, along with the context of our attending. Polanyi makes frequent references to Piaget's 'genetic epistemology', and to his distinction between 'assimilation' and 'accommodation' (Polanyi substitutes 'adaptation', PK: 105). This he also interprets as 'indwelling' and 'breaking out', respectively, PK: 195-202). We are not inevitably trapped within our existing frameworks but have the essentially tacit power to apprehend realities which do not fit them and to form new categories, concepts and language to adapt our existing intellectual frameworks, which Collingwood called our 'absolute presuppositions': COLLINGWOOD (1998). See also KORNER (1970).

them and make their objects at least partly comprehensible (BLAGA 1933, BLAGA 2017: 72).

The linguistic implications of Blaga's and similar epistemologies include a radical revision of the idea and role of metaphor, and indeed, of language itself. Metaphor is no longer only a literary decoration as a figure of speech but the only way to think and speak of an otherwise unassimilatable and incomprehensible mystery.

Blaga distinguishes 'plastic' or 'manufactory' metaphors from 'revelatory' metaphors. The former are metaphors as understood in the existing concepts and categories of language: that is, as speaking of one known object in terms of another known object, and thus the standard metaphors are figures of speech. The example of such a metaphor which I still remember that we were given years ago in primary school, was, 'The ship ploughs the ocean'. This has a pictorial and emotional force, and what Bernard Berenson would have called 'tactile' values, all of which are lacking in 'The ship goes through the ocean as a plough goes through the soil'. We see the plough and the curve of the tilth in the bow and bow wave, and feel the effort behind the plough in the moving ship and the drag of the soil in that of the water, especially if we are familiar with horse-drawn ploughs and heavy clay soils, as I was then.

As stated above, such metaphors can be used in non-literary contexts to explain something known to one who does not know it, and to infer or argue from an element or aspect in one known object to its counterpart, as yet unknown, in another known object.

But how can one speak of that of which no one has spoken before? Inventing a word like 'quark' is of no use by itself for its meaning still has to be explained. And saying that it is like something already known cannot be done in the case of something previously completely unknown. Moreover the discoverer needs something that can articulate it for himself and so fix it in his own mind: truly, having a word for something does give us intellectual control of it, though not magical powers as in animistic cosmologies. This is where Blaga's 'revelatory' metaphors come into play:

> While the first type of metaphor does not increase the signification of the objects it refers to, but only reshapes their direct expression, the word as such, the second type of metaphor increases the signification of the very objects they refer to. Revelatory metaphors bring to light something hidden, something concerning the very facts they concentrate upon. Revelatory metaphors try, in fact, to reveal a "mystery" by the means put at our disposal by the concrete world, by the experience of the senses and by the imaginary world. […] Revelatory metaphors result from the specifically human mode of existing, from existence within the horizon of mystery and revelation. Revelatory metaphors are the first symptoms of this specific mode of existence. We do not idealize the situation when we say that revelatory metaphors also testify to the existence of an anthropological level, a deep level given to man together with his being. As long as man (not yet a full "Man") lives outside mystery without being aware of it, in an undisturbed state of paradisaic-animal harmony with himself and the world, he uses manufactory metaphors as the only ones required to solve the discrepancy between the concrete and the abstract. Revelatory metaphors are used when man becomes "Man" indeed, that is the moment he places himself within the horizon and the scope of mystery (BLAGA 1937, BLAGA 2017: 98-103).

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Several questions arise from this summary account. First, Just how do they work? The intention of such a metaphor is to point to something radically new which the discoverer wants both to make clear to himself and then to others. What Polanyi calls a 'logical gap' has opened up between existing knowledge and what the discoverer has found (PK: 123)[6] In the case of a discovery which requires a radically new way of thinking, a corresponding logical gap opens between existing terminology and that needed for the discovery (PK: 151). The same applies to the learning of a new discipline and thus of the language used for it (PK: 101, on Polanyi's own experience with X-rays of pulmonary diseases). Thus 'revelatory metaphors' use existing words which appear in some way and some degree appropriate and which are then tacitly modified so that they take on a new meaning, which eventually in the new context will become another 'literal' meaning of them[7]. When speaking to others the discoverer tries to get his audience to cease attending *to* his language, which he is likely to be using in a strange fashion, and instead to attend *from* it and *to* that so far unknown object which he is trying to persuade them to focus upon and to begin to comprehend. Only this double *from-to* intentionality, as articulated by Polanyi, can account for the fact not only of revelatory metaphors but of all language. For words have meaning only as we attend from them to what they mean, as shown by repeating a word in isolation, which can regain its meaning only by being used in a sentence (PK: 199).

I shall now give examples – two successful, one unsuccessful, and one partially successful, of such attempts at conceptual innovations by means of revelatory metaphors: viz. 'gravity' and 'evolution', 'animal magnetism', and 'inflation', respectively.

Newton's coining (another metaphor now almost dead!) of 'gravity' from the Latin 'gravis' meaning 'heavy' and thence 'gravitas' meaning 'weight' and thence 'extreme seriousness', 'extreme importance' and 'solemnity' (more metaphors!), for the attraction between physical bodies, was a *revelatory* one, for like magnetism, it referred to a form of action from a distance which natural philosophers had resolutely denied (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, etymonline.com). That new meaning is now the standard one, with 'weightiness' and 'importance' as secondary meanings.

'Evolution' before Darwin meant what is now called 'ontogenesis', the 'out-turning' of the seed into the mature plant or fertilised egg in to the mature animal. But to explain what the fossil record and the differentiated species of birds, reptiles and plants on the separate islands of the Galapagos suggested to him, Darwin used 'evolution' in a radically new sense to mean the emergence of new species and orders of plants and animals, i.e. morphogenesis. With evolution' he used 'natural selection', as distinct from the 'artificial selection' practised by breeders, and 'survival of the fittest' to continue to exist among changes in environments, plus

[6] Polanyi insists that this is an irreversible process and one that cannot be reached by following rules.

[7] Indeed, the new meaning can eventually replace the original one. This, for some people, has happened with what I call 'reductive metaphors' (as distinct from 'enlarging ones' as in theology and also from 'extending ones' as under consideration here), notably when used for the functions of computers, so that 'AI' in effect becomes *real* intelligence, a computer's 'memory' *real* memory, its 'knowing' *actual* knowing, and so our intelligence, memory and knowing are thus taken to be like those of computers! By 1944 most things in Germany were 'ersatz', but the Germans still knew the difference between the substitute and the real thing though young children would not.

'sexual selection', to explain changes in species and their survival or extinction. Again, that has now become the standard meaning, although it conflates the observed facts and the general explanation of them by 'evolution' from previous species, with Darwin's own particular explanation and that of the random mutation of genes formulated by contemporary Neo-Darwinism.

To try to explain how he could influence people, Mesmer unfortunately used the term 'animal magnetism', which signally failed to be a revelatory metaphor by evoking ridicule and not understanding *from* it *to* what Mesmer and then Elliotson were trying to explain. It had the unfortunate result that hundreds of painful operations continued to be performed, despite all Elliotson's demonstrations of its effectiveness. Only decades later was it gradually realised that it was a form of hypnotism, a word coined in 1842 by Dr James Braid, and thus became acceptable (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, etymonline.com)[8].

Finally, when general increases in prices were experienced in Europe in the 16th C., people could not understand why it was happening and why monarchs, financing their activities by traditional sources such as the incomes from their own estates and customs duties, were always demanding more in the way of taxes. Sir Thomas Gresham made the first attempt at understanding it with his law, that bad money (clipped coinage) drives out good, i.e. people hoarded unclipped coins and spent clipped ones, which were no longer worth in bullion what was their face value. The cause, as we now know, was the importation of vast amounts of gold and silver from the Americas into Spain and thence their overflow into other countries. Even Adam Smith, in the *Wealth of Nations*, struggled to define the real value of a currency as distinct from its exchange value against another currency and the differences between its nominal and bullion values. Only in 1838 in America was 'inflation', from the Latin 'inflatio' from 'flare', to blow', and thence 'flatulence', first recorded as meaning an enlargement of prices, and from 1843 as applying to money (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, etymonline.com). Even today official sources still use it to refer only to increases in prices, and then only to those used to calculate an average 'cost of living' to the exclusion of the prices of residential and commercial property and of assets such as stocks and shares. They thereby fail to attend to the cause of a general rise in prices, which is the increase of the supply of money beyond the increase in the supply of goods and services as governments create more money and so 'inflate' its supply by more than what is needed. It is still not fully understood that supply and demand apply to currencies, not just in terms of their mutual exchange rates, but also in their real value of purchasing power.

In conclusion, the role of metaphor in argumentation and thinking generally is primarily that of articulating an awareness of something new and for which we have no existing words, in the hope that it will fix its new object in our minds and convey something to others and thus be adapted to this new usage and meaning. This involves a more radical exercise of our tacit mental powers of adaptation of our existing frameworks of categories and concepts, and of our language, than the use of metaphors as 'figures of speech' to use one existing conception and set of words to explain or make more vivid another existing conception and set of words, as we do with analogies and models. In turn, that may well require a radical revision, along the

[8] Polanyi mentions Mesmer and Elliotson several times: (PK: 51-52, 107-108, 157n., 274, 275n.), but in the same context of confusions and later clarifications of meanings.

lines indicated by such as Polanyi and Blaga, of what we assume our knowledge, thinking and language to be.

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