

## THE THEORY OF ESSENTIAL METAPHOR: A REJOINDER

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Anyone who has entered this discussion by reading Gordon Clark's reply can be forgiven for drawing the following conclusions about my original article: (a) The theory presented there is my own, so that the debate is between Clark and Macky, for Clark never even mentions the name of C. S. Lewis, whose views I presented. (b) Metaphor is a secondary aspect of my article, of minor significance compared with an array of epistemological issues. (c) My article presents only bare assertions about metaphor, giving no arguments for the view there presented. (d) Indeed, I present no clear view, for at one point the theory I present is described by Clark as holding "that the Bible is entirely metaphorical and that literal language has been imposed on it by later theologians" and at a later point he suggests that the theory "at least comes close to concluding that all words are metaphorical."

As a prelude to reading this rejoinder I invite readers to consider my original article and see if those conclusions can be reasonably reached by an attentive reader of the article.

My conclusion in reading Clark's reply is this: He clearly is not familiar with the particular theory of metaphor that Lewis presents and argues for in numerous articles and books. My intention in writing the original article was to demonstrate that there is a coherent evangelical theory of metaphor available that differs from Clark's in major respects. My hope was that Clark, or someone who holds to his general views, would provide a clear and detailed defense of the theory he adopts. So far he has not done so. Thus I hope that by providing this fuller elaboration and direct questions to him I may tempt him to defend his advocacy of the "ornamental" theory of metaphor in detail, since nowhere have I found him doing so.

The foundation of Lewis' theory of essential metaphor is his suggestion that "knowing" is a very complex phenomenon. In particular he shows that we need to distinguish "spectator knowing" (detached knowing about) from "participant knowing" (knowing by personal, involved experience). Using this rough distinction he points out that our deepest knowledge of ourselves, of intimate friends and of God is participant knowledge (though of course we have a considerable amount of spectator knowledge about those subjects also). For our purposes in this discussion the major characteristic of participant knowledge is that we can know much more than we can put into words. Our speech can only express a small portion of such personal knowledge. Further, since the realities of concern here are mysterious in their depths, the best way to suggest something of those depths is by writing that is also somewhat mysterious. As Lewis once wrote: "The very essence of our life as conscious beings, all day and every day, consists of something which

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cannot be communicated except by hints, similes, metaphors and the use of those emotions (themselves not very important) which are pointers to it."<sup>1</sup> Those who assert that all we know can be stated clearly and literally have allowed their theory to blind them to the wondrous depths of their own daily experience.

The questions I have for Clark are these: (1) Does he deny that there are profound and mysterious human experiences that provide us with participant knowledge, which can be most adequately verbalized indirectly, obliquely, by suggestion rather than by precise, explicit statements? (2) If he does deny it, what justification does he offer?

Secondly, Lewis asserts that the whole realm of literature (which is often what he means by the word "poetry") has as its main purpose the stimulating and sharing of such participant knowledge of deep human experience.<sup>2</sup> Literature is less direct, less precise, less clear, less logically ordered than more philosophical speech because the reality literature deals with is mysterious, beyond our ability to express very well in words.

(3) Does Clark deny that literature can often stimulate vicarious experiences that provide participant knowledge of the deep mysteries of human life in a way that transcends what philosophy and the social sciences can provide? (4) If he does deny it, then how can he justify his denial when many Christians (such as Lewis) have gained such experience through great literature (Biblical, Christian and even non-Christian)?

Thirdly, Lewis sees metaphor as one of the central elements of literature, though it is also used extensively in philosophy, theology, science and indeed in all realms of thought. By "metaphor" he means "thinking (and often then speaking) of a lesser known reality in terms of a better known one that is in some significant way similar to it." So we speak of God, who is a profound mystery, in terms of human images of fathers, husbands, makers, rulers, judges, and so forth, which most people know better.

This is a considerably broader definition of metaphor than that advanced by some other scholars—i.e., "an unusual use of a word, based upon a similarity between the subject of interest and the reality usually referred to by that word." For Lewis that distinction between "usual" and "unusual" uses is not the most important line to draw (though it does distinguish between fresh and conventional metaphors). He draws the line by making an epistemic distinction between direct use (referring only to a single subject), which is literal use, and indirect use (thinking about a second reality—e.g., a father—as a means to think about the primary subject—e.g. God), which he labels metaphorical use.

Lewis recognizes that sometimes metaphors are "ornamental," used to dress up ideas that could be stated literally, just as Clark's theory states. That, however, is not the only or even the main use of metaphor. The most important role

<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, "The Language of Religion," *Christian Reflections*, p. 140.

<sup>2</sup>When Clark says in his reply that "human experience cannot be shared" he misunderstands my meaning in using the word "share" in such a context. He is right that the "subjective accompaniments" of a common experience "cannot be common." However, one person can reveal to another something of what he subjectively experienced. This revelation or sharing can be by physical expression, by a variety of sounds other than normal speech, and by the use of various indirect forms of speech such as metaphors. "I felt as if a truck had hit me" is a common way for us to "share"—i.e., reveal to some extent—what has happened to us.

for metaphor is to illumine a little the mysterious depths of reality by likening them to things that are better known. Jesus did that by likening the coming rule of God to a mustard seed growing, to yeast expanding, and to a wedding feast given by a king for his son. Jesus did not present a precise, literal statement about the kingdom because the reality is beyond our comprehension. But he illumined that transcendent reality greatly by his parables, sayings and actions in overcoming evil.

My questions for Clark at this point are: (5) Does he deny that Jesus' essential strategy for revealing what we need to know about God's coming rule was to liken it to a whole array of things his hearers knew better? (6) If that was Jesus' method, what justification is there for thinking that we can improve on it by seeking literal descriptions of transcendent realities?

The specific thesis Lewis advances is this: Whenever we talk about supersensible realities we necessarily do so by metaphor—that is, by likening them to things we know better.<sup>3</sup> In this statement the adjective and first verb are decisive. "Supersensible" realities are those we cannot observe with our five senses. Included in this category are God as he is in himself, his ways of acting hiddenly within the world, heaven, hell, the relationship of the divine and human in Christ, the saving action transpiring on the cross, and much more. "Sensible" realities such as observable events (e.g., Jesus as returned from death) can often be described literally.<sup>4</sup>

When Lewis says we cannot "talk about" supersensibles except by metaphor he is distinguishing one type of speech ("explanation") from several others. For example, we certainly can "refer" to supersensibles literally, as in "I understand." What we need metaphor for is to explain what we mean by "understand": Historically, vision has been a main source of such metaphors ("I see").

Thus in direct response to Clark's misunderstanding of Lewis' theory let me assert plainly: Lewis does not think all speech is metaphorical. He does not think that all Biblical or theological speech is necessarily metaphorical—just those parts of them that seek to explain supersensible realities. When the Biblical authors and later theologians speak of nature, history and ethics they can include a considerable portion of literal speech.

Lewis' theory of essential metaphor thus falls between the two extremes that seem to be the only theories Clark recognizes: The theory he accepts is one that has been labelled the "ornamental" theory, according to which metaphors are never necessary for thought because the meaning of every metaphor (so it is

<sup>3</sup>Clark misunderstands Lewis' assertion that "it is of the very nature of thought and language to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms." Clark takes this as a universal statement, equivalent to "the only way to represent what is immaterial is in picturable terms." That is not what Lewis believes and so not what he means here. His assertion can be more accurately paraphrased this way: "One of the basic strategies of thought and language (and perhaps the oldest one) is to represent what is immaterial in picturable terms." Clear examples of this strategy are found in the allegorical tradition, which represents human emotions by literary characters (e.g. Giant Despair). Common speech, too, represents immaterial realities this way, as Lewis noted: From as far back as we have evidence of language use human beings have used the picturable "up" and "down" as ways to suggest something of good versus evil, the happy versus the sad.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Lewis, *Miracles*, chap. 10 for the best summary in Lewis' writings of this theory of essential metaphor.

claimed) can be expressed more accurately in literal speech. (This theory rose to prominence—indeed, dominance—in the post-Enlightenment period as empiricism and rationalism came to dominate philosophy in the West.) At the other extreme is the “universal” theory, according to which every use of language is metaphorical to one degree or another. Of course Lewis’ position is by no means the only possible place to stand between these two extremes. It is, however, the standpoint that has been developed, defended and used by an evangelical scholar who knew literature and the philosophy of literature as well as any evangelical ever has.

The heart of the difference between Clark and Lewis is that the former thinks that all meaningful metaphors can be explained in literal speech. Lewis disagrees. He shows that many metaphors—those describing sensible realities—can often be explained literally. This is possible because those realities can usually be directly observed and so directly described by words that observers can agree to use for the same observed characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Then he demonstrates that metaphors about supersensibles cannot be explained that way. Rather, when we explain a metaphor about a supersensible reality we do so by bringing in other metaphors. The additional metaphors provide a context (the way a paragraph provides a necessary context for a single sentence) that limits the way the first metaphor can properly be interpreted. In a similar way the view from our second eye is a corrective to the view that comes with only one eye open. For example, if “God is our father” is the only thing a person knows about God he may misconstrue the metaphor badly. But when alongside it we bring “God is our creator” and “God is our judge” then the person who has ears to hear will gain a somewhat more precise understanding of the profound mystery God is in our lives.

The picture that I use to suggest something of how multiple metaphors provide much more precise insight than a single metaphor can is this: Imagine a large garden with trees and high bushes and many patches of mist spread throughout it. Around the garden is a wall with thick glass windows set in it at various places. If we look through a single window we will see only a small portion of the garden and not see even that perfectly, because visual observation is never perfect. But if we move around the wall and look through all the windows each new perspective will enable us to add to our previous observations and so correct to some extent our earlier conclusions. In the end the garden will still be somewhat mysterious, and our conclusions will still be tinged with error, but we will be a lot closer to the truth than we were when we looked through just one window. Likewise the multiple Biblical metaphors for God, Christ, the cross, and so forth provide us with as much insight as God apparently thinks we need.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Cf. his article “Bluspels . . .” in *Rehabilitations*.

<sup>6</sup>One of Clark’s objections to Lewis’ theory seems to be that a collection of metaphors is not “clear” because metaphors are not as precise as literal statements can sometimes be. Clark’s standard is this: “What cannot be expressed clearly is not meaningful.” (Cf. p. 240 of my article.) The trouble with this standard is that it is unusable because of vagueness (it is not clear), because there is no objective standard of “clear expression.” Instead the decision on what is or is not clear varies a great deal from reader to reader depending on their knowledge of what the writer was thinking about when he wrote.

In his reply to this criticism, Clark gives evidence that he does not understand this objection, which he summarizes as criticizing him “as inconsistently using the phrase ‘clear thinking’.” When he asks whether for “clear” he should substitute “intelligible” or “correct” thinking he shows that he has missed the point. “Only intelligible expression is meaningful” is probably a tautology, but in addition “intelligi-

In his writings Lewis often shows how we can interpret Biblical metaphors by bringing in others that illumine what really is central in those original metaphors. Thus he would have no difficulty in accepting as useful Clark's interpretation of the metaphor "Christ is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Clark interprets this as meaning that "Christ's death is the vicarious satisfaction of divine justice." This interpretation does help us focus on something central in the lamb metaphor because we are more familiar with the satisfaction of justice than we are with sacrifice of lambs. Where Lewis differs from Clark is over the linguistic status of the "satisfaction of divine justice" image. Clark calls this literal speech. Lewis' view is that it is another metaphor, as I explained earlier (on p. 249 of my previous article).

For Lewis "satisfaction of divine justice" is one of a number of metaphors we should hold together in order to see as deeply as possible into the mystery of the cross.<sup>7</sup> Among other basic NT metaphors that illumine the meaning of Christ's death are "reconciliation of enemies," "forgiveness of harm done by a friend," "buying back a slave" and "defeating the forces of evil in a battle to the death." The Bible uses all of these metaphors (and a number of others), but Clark's tradition has chosen one of them ("satisfaction"), elevated it to the position of the ruling image and then forgotten that it is a metaphor. In a similar way the metaphor "the world is a machine" has been mistakenly taken to be the literal truth by many modern thinkers.

The questions I would like Clark to answer are these: (9) Can he explain "satisfaction of divine justice" in a way that does not use "satisfaction of human justice" (or some other human interaction) as its foundation? If he cannot then his theory is based on a metaphor, as are all such theories. (10) How does he justify picking out one of the Biblical metaphors and claiming it is literal truth when the Bible (especially Paul) so obviously uses an array of complementary metaphors?

This theory of essential metaphor that Lewis presents can be argued for in as much detail as there is room for. Those seeking greater detail will find it soon in my forthcoming book *Exploring the Depths of the Bible* (subtitled "With C. S. Lewis as Our Guide"). Even within the space limitations of a journal paper I presented a variety of supports for the theory (e.g., the argument about the linguistic status of "satisfaction of divine justice" on p. 249). Clark complains, however, that my discussion "relies on bare assertions without giving reasons for accepting them." My response is threefold: (a) The footnotes provide directions to Lewis' writings so that interested and conscientious readers can find considerable detail. (b) Often the assertions I took over from Lewis were meant to appeal to the readers' own experience—e.g., the distinction between spectator knowledge and participant knowledge. (c) The logical coherence of the points Lewis makes is central to the justification for his theory.

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bility" is not objective but varies from reader to reader. "Only correct expression is meaningful" is probably wrong (depending on what he means by "correct" in this context) because errors must be meaningful in order for us to see that they are errors.

The questions I have for Clark on this issue are these: (7) Can he provide an objective definition of "clear expression" so that his standard of meaningfulness can be applied by readers other than himself? (8) How does he answer my original comment that the charge "That is meaningless!" is really the admission "I can find no meaning in that"?

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, book 2, chap. 4.

By this third standard—coherence—Clark's theory seems to fail. His basic axiom is revelation (the Bible), from which he says he deduces the laws of logic (which are exemplified to some extent in geometry).<sup>8</sup> He claims that such realms of human thought as sense perception, science and history do not provide us with "knowledge" or "truth" because they always have a portion of error in them. The questions I would like Clark to answer are these: (11) How is it possible for him to know what the Bible means except by using the somewhat fallible processes of historical study and textual interpretation? (12) If he must use those processes, then are not his conclusions about what the Bible means also fallible, tinged with error that he cannot eradicate? (13) If that is the case then how can he use his knowledge of the Bible's meaning as his axiom (because a fallible axiom produces a necessarily fallible system)?

Finally, let us talk about geometry. Clark says that I have a strong dislike for geometry because I think it should not be taken as the standard for proper thinking. He is wrong about my attitude. He has misread my article here again, for I love geometry. I did very well in it. Now I am enjoying working on it with my 13-year-old son and think it is an admirable introduction to logical thinking. Thus I have no objection to geometry in its proper place.

My attitude toward the misuse of geometry can perhaps be suggested by an analogy. My son is very good at mathematics, so I have no qualms about letting him do any mathematical work I need to have done. But when I am helping a friend deal with a personal trauma it would be a mistake to ask my son to deal with the problem because at 13 he is quite incapable of dealing with such a reality. Likewise it is a mistake to use geometry as the standard of thought in dealing with the depths of human experience.

By "geometry" I mean the process of thought exemplified there (a point I should have made clear in my previous article). This process includes the use of axioms, deductive logic, coherence as the norm, ending with theorems as true conclusions. Undoubtedly this is a very important process of thought, but it is not the only valuable one. Indeed, even more valuable for our daily thought is the process of moving from observed data by inductive logic (and intuitive leaps) to hypotheses that are then tested by their correspondence to perceived reality and other accepted hypotheses. The results of such induction are always tinged with error, but the best results provide adequate guidance for daily life and the developments of science. Beyond those two logically structured thought processes is the realm of literature, in which time and action and character provide the structure. Literature reveals what logically-structured processes cannot: a glimpse into the mysterious depths of experience. In speaking of those depths logic has a role, but it is secondary to the roles of memory of experience, imagination and aesthetic response. Poems and stories that paint word-pictures of life-shaping experiences cannot be judged by logic alone. There are aspects of such writings that are neither logical nor illogical but alogical. For example, when a person cries out in anger or pain or joy or humility, the standards of deductive or inductive

<sup>8</sup>Clark objects to my saying that he "excludes all human thought except geometry from the realm of truth." His reply is that revelation is the basic truth for him so that logic is not his primary axiom. The context of my statement (p. 248) makes it quite clear that I recognize the Bible as his basic truth. The distinction I make there is based on his view that the Bible is essentially "divine thought," so what I mean by the phrase "human thought" is "human-originated"—i.e., nonrevealed—"thought."

logic do not help us very much to understand the experience that the cry reveals. Listen to Paul as he cries out in wonder: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33). If we are to understand this we must imagine ourselves in Paul's shoes, seek to experience something of the humility and wonder he felt, and then we will have begun to understand his cry here. Then perhaps we will learn to recognize that there are depths beyond our searching and understanding in this life.

Clark's reply suggests to me that he has not yet understood Lewis' theory because he is not familiar with it. In this rejoinder I have stressed what seem to be the main points in dispute and asked specific questions that can help to make the differences between Clark and Lewis clearer. I invite Clark to answer those questions (especially numbers 5, 6, 9 and 10).