Book Review


It is easy, as numerous philosophers of language have demonstrated, to regard metaphorical utterances as irremediably secondary, or indeed as parasitic to the conveyors of meaning that do the heavy lifting — that is, declarative literal propositions. That approach, laden with its neo-positivist presuppositions, would blind us from the outset to the expressive richness waiting to be found in metaphorical speech, and it would seriously undermine any attempt to articulate in a convincing way the deep connection between our capacity for metaphor — to see and then describe one thing as another that it evidently is not — and our capacity for (nothing less than) mutual human understanding. Ted Cohen, in his brilliant, incisive, eminently readable, and engagingly personal new book offers just such an articulation.

To set the stage a bit: Cohen makes immediately clear that he is working beyond the reach of projects that would assume that all metaphorical statements possess (if initially hidden) a literal content that is amenable without loss to direct and literal propositional expression, that all metaphors can be analyzed into elliptical similes (‘Juliet is the sun’, while it conveys literal properties of the sun, still conveys metaphorical properties of Juliet, so the attempt to press out metaphorical content by reduction to literal simile instructively fails), or that metaphorical content can always be re-expressed as non-figurative (Aristotelian) comparison. Cohen, writing as an exponent of what used to be called ordinary-language philosophy (still often grossly misunderstood as linguistic police work), proceeds both fully aware and acutely mindful of the practices (linguistic and otherwise — not that that is a sharp line) in which we humans engage. Cohen, as he insists, is not writing a book directly on metaphor, and he is happy to accept as what he calls a wonderful mystery our ability to see A as B; he is writing a book on the connection — a connection that, for Cohen, is a significant part of what makes us what we are as human beings — between literally false but irreducibly meaningful A-B identifications and imaginative acts or leaps of seeing ourselves as another (and thereby meeting one fundamental precondition for one person genuinely understanding another.)

On this latter point Cohen has impressively — I would say reorientatingly — high standards. Philosophers of language can (they do not all do
this all the time, nor do all do this some of the time — but some certainly do this much of the time) proceed as though human understanding has a unitary essence that can be given a full account by putting an utterer of a declarative proposition (usually involving the colour of snow or the relative positioning of a cat) in front of a hearer who grasps that proposition’s truth condition. Cohen, by welcome contrast, shows repeatedly and with considerable humane depth the wondrous complexity of mutual comprehension (see his exemplary discussion of Hamlet in this connection), and the extent to which such comprehension depends on this foundational metaphorical capacity.

And this capacity, this special talent that is constitutive of who we are, is, as Cohen also repeatedly shows, never isolated; that is, the content implied by a metaphor is never wholly contained within its sentence. Cohen says that metaphors suggest other metaphors in turn, and they do so almost by implication. If you see a literary critic as one who explains effects, and you know that a coroner, as he says, paradigmatically explains effects, you can see the critic as a coroner, with the book then seen as weapon, the author as victim-izer, and the reader as victim. Then within this microcosm of metaphorical implication, Cohen suggests that you can see that, while Tolstoy kills with large, overpowering weapons, Proust sedates you to death. And Hemingway? The choices, Cohen suggests, would be machine gun or sniper rifle. (Cohen is here extending, as examples of this distinctive variety of metaphorical implication, the weapon-metaphor for authorship of Richard Stern’s; Cohen considers alternatives, e.g. seeing the novelist as therapist, and then seeing that image’s subsequent metaphorically-implied ways of seeing and speaking.)

Although Cohen does not put the matter in precisely these terms, he is particularly adept at bringing into full view the creative dimension of metaphorical usage, whereby something new is brought into being in a way that an atomistic analysis of assembled, or additive meaning, could never accommodate. In calling Mussolini a utensil, Winston Churchill puts Mussolini in an obviously bad light (as would saying that he is a swine), but in a way that exactingly conveys negative import but of a kind (here is the anti-atomistic, creative element) that is not transferred from content internally contained in the word ‘utensil’. It is not pejorative to identify a fork as a utensil; nor, as Cohen indicates would all metaphorical uses of ‘utensil’ be, just because of that metaphorical employment, pejorative; for example consider seeing language (or some part of it) as a utensil. The ‘new entity, a kind of compound’ (p. 6), as Cohen calls it, has the power (this goes back to Arnold Isenberg on critical communication) to induce in its hearers the precise feeling attendant upon the special light — the creative description — in which the subject is placed. These creative acts are evidently not instances of usual identity claims (where X equals Y implies Y equals X); Cohen calls these metaphors of personal identification — a kind of identity is indeed in play, but it is not a matter of formal relation, nor is its extension a matter of formal implication. And to think of A in terms of, or in the light of, or as, B, is not in these cases
to think of a single property that A and B share, but rather where A can be thought to have, or imagined to have, a property of B that it plainly does not literally possess. Such metaphorical employments run throughout our talk about the arts just as they run through our talk about many other areas of human interest, and they are thus woven throughout innumerable contexts, from the mundane to the profound, of mutual personal understanding.

Yet, even with all the muscular strength of this slim volume punching well above its weight, I think Cohen needs to say more (and one hopes he will in future writings) about (1) the constraints on such metaphorically-based forms of mutual understanding, and (2) the ways in which we might helpfully articulate these constraints. On the first question, there is at work here, one sees (although it can be hard to say — and here we want Cohen’s help) something deeply analogous to a famous answer the free-jazz pianist Cecil Taylor gave to a young new member of his ensemble. In response to the question ‘What about playing within underlying harmonic, rhythmic, and formal structures?’, Taylor answered ‘Forget all that — but just be sure to play within the range of the idea’. A fascinating answer (and incidentally one perfectly fitting for the kind of musical coherence one hears in Taylor’s work), and I think one that is directly parallel to the range of ideas awakened by a provocative or intellectually stimulating metaphor. Is it indeed possible to say anything about the constraints in a way that transcends the contexts within which we see them and acknowledge them in our linguistic practices? One leaves Cohen’s discussion unsure what to say on this score. And on the second question, one wonders if we might have some terminology to hand that my be in place for this, specifically on the fixity of denotation and relative openness of connotation, where the richness or depth of a metaphor would then be measured by what we might call the constellation of connotations set in play — or perhaps more importantly, in possible play — by a denotation. (That the falsity of the denotative claim, i.e. the claim that A is B where A is clearly not B, would not undermine the truth of the connotative content would then also be an area to investigate in these terms.) Or one might usefully put the matter in terms of a range of awakened associations, where the range is demarcated by the linguistic analogue to Taylor’s ‘idea’. If the range has indeterminate boundaries (which is not to say, as discussions of vagueness show, that it thus has no real boundaries), then that indeterminate-boundedness itself might help describe the roles that sensibility and non-formulaic judgements of taste (to which I will return below) play in these matters. Of course, it may be that any such terminology (denotation, connotation, association, etc.) is inimical to Cohen’s enterprise precisely for the reason that all of the interesting action takes place on the ground of our practices in context — but then one wants the reasons for that view carefully articulated as well. (To adapt Carl Sagan’s remark that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, absence of terminological clarification is not itself
evidence of the unavailability of any such terminology.) So, on both of these issues, one might want more.

But then, like metaphor, Cohen’s book implies a good deal more, or reaches in what we might call here its textual implicature, well beyond what it explicitly states. In cases of metaphorically-based imaginative transfer we can encounter circumstances that (here is what Cohen beautifully shows but does not pause to say explicitly) forcefully unsettle a too-entrenched picture of self-knowledge (against a false contrast of always-weaker other-knowledge); Cohen’s telling example is our knowing of our friend Abner how he will behave in combat (as an experienced and repeatedly courageous soldier) where we are unsure of how we will act (being inexperienced and untried). There is to be sure much more to say here—indeed perhaps another book of this length—on the extensive significance Cohen’s conception of metaphorically based other-understanding holds for our understanding of (and our metaphorical descriptions of) ourselves. But this is not to say that he leaves the matter untouched: in examining a biblical story (of King David first having tried to hide his having impregnated Bathsheba and then arranging the death in battle of her husband Uriah) Cohen brings into sharp focus how, when Nathan is sent by a displeased Lord to show David what he is, Nathan does not tell David anything he does not already know (so the precise epistemic gain is not to be captured in a previously unknown declarative proposition), but Nathan does bring about wholly new feelings about what David has known as a result of seeing himself within a new metaphorical frame of self-identification. This depends upon David being told a separate story about how a rich man came and took a poor man’s treasured single ewe lamb, David’s anger being kindled about it, and then being told by Nathan, ‘Thou art the man’. Cohen is impressively exacting (as he is so often throughout this exceptionally lucid book) here: the change in self-understanding is not a function of David’s being told merely a literal falsehood, nor that he shares membership in a class with the rich man, nor even that any claim about him has been indirectly stated in elliptical form. What matters for the gain in self-knowledge is the precise emotional tone awakened by ‘the absolute particularity’ (p. 22) of the rich man, now seen by David (in a manner of speaking) as himself, so that what one might call (Cohen does not) the inflection of self-description has changed. And this, for Cohen, is the best brief description of the work of art criticism as well—to effect, through such metaphorically-structured speech, a sameness of vision (Isenberg’s phrase, upon which Cohen nicely builds) that in turn brings us together in a mutuality of understanding. Cohen says that he does not know how to analyse (I believe he means analyse without significant loss of humane content) the proposition that, after hearing the story, David sees himself as the rich man, nor is he at all sure that any such analysis is to be given. What Cohen does give, richly and fully, is a nuanced sense of the change in vision that Nathan’s successful inducement to think of himself
as another has occasioned, and how David’s newly acquired self-directed feeling ‘anchors the metaphor and signals its success’ (p. 23).

Cohen notes that this broad conception of metaphor-based increases in understanding without a corresponding uptake in new propositional fact helps with an issue long standing, well articulated when Max Black observed that it can be more illuminating to say that a novel metaphor newly creates rather than describes an antecedently-existing comparison. If the comparison, as Cohen says, is presumed to involve a relation between properties of objects, this creativity-thesis is difficult to render in plausible form for transparent reasons. But if we are primarily concerned with the feelings induced (in David’s case self-directed ones, but of course they need not be this) by the metaphor as the non-propositional content (one should probably say here ‘extra-propositional’) that it delivers as a figurative-emotive species of illocutionary force (Cohen is clearly indebted to J. L. Austin, but this only comes to the surface of the text once, pp. 49–50), then it is straightforwardly sensible to speak of a new feeling (here of self-assessment) created by the metaphor that itself involves comparison to the original assessment-feeling (here awakened by the story of the rich man). What is instructive to David here is thus not the kind of thing that can be seen independently of this metaphorically empowered human circumstance. Nor is its instructive force, as Cohen pointedly observes, dependent upon its truth as a story. Fiction would work as well.

And so it does. It is tempting, Cohen notes, to suppose either that we could have no real emotions in response to fictional works, or that if we have any such emotions, then they must be of a kind markedly different from our real ones. In the main, this supposition, Cohen insists, is misleading. It is not just that, as has been clear since Kant’s discussion of the ontological argument, that ‘the thought of something is the same whether the thing is real or not’ (p. 29). It is rather that neither of the two main and much discussed reasons for supposing the categorical distinction between real and fictional emotions really comport very well with many of our other closely related engagements in human life. Cohen means this: the first much-discussed reason is that, in the fictional cases, we are not moved to act to prevent the fictional person’s damage or demise. But this cannot work as a separation of emotional kinds, precisely because in cases of bullfights, car racing, dangerous sports, and so forth we have real emotions for real matadors etc. and yet remain in the stands while the real bull passes too closely to the real matador. And many such cases would not be engaging in the way they are, were it not for the real danger coupled to our pre-established inability to intervene. The second reason is the unpleasantness problem: why would we not withdraw or do anything possible to avoid our growing fear for the fate of Mrs Mulwray in Chinatown, if indeed our fear were real? Because, Cohen says (and here again he shows his full-blooded sense of what we humans actually — and in some cases somewhat mysteriously — do, and not what we might imagine we
should do to fill a philosophical bill), the serious degree of what he calls ‘engagement’ in such cases is what we are fundamentally after, and *that* depends for its possibility (I am recasting Cohen’s point here, but I think this is within the range of his intentions) on the very fear that is deemed generically or a-contextually unpleasant by philosophers. In the spirit of Ryle on ‘knowing how’ versus ‘knowing that’, I for one think we would do well to speak in these cases—Mrs Mulwray, Anna Karenina, et al.—of not just fearing, nor fearing that, but fearing *for*. ‘Fearing’, simpliciter, seems to slant the discussion in favour of an internalist conception of the emotions, so that the questions we then face concern the relation between the emotion we feel and the beliefs we hold as internally contained. As a partial correction to this, ‘fearing that’ places some emphasis on the need for an object of the emotion to give content to, and make comprehensible, the particular emotional state in question—but the emphasis is still on our internal experience. Fearing for, by contrast, would go further toward ‘externalizing’ the emotion, so that the object of our fear just is the inner experience of another character, and this would comport well with Cohen’s point that such a character may be real or imagined. But this too reaches beyond where Cohen left the matter, and he may here as well have had good—if suppressed—reasons for leaving it exactly where he did.

Be that as it may, in addition to bullfights, car races, and dangerous sporting events, Cohen brings to bear here the countless cases of readers who, as he says, ‘commonly say they have real feelings about fictions, and they name these feelings with the same words they use when naming feelings they have about real, existent things’ (p. 36). And with a charmingly forthright honesty he cites his own experience along the same lines. One might think what he says here is consistent with what has been discussed as ‘thought theory’ in response to the problem of fictional emotion, but it is not—for the straightforward reason that Cohen (as one who gives priority to practice not by mere preference for pragmatics, but rather I think because of the deep vision concerning the contextual or occasion-specific conditions for semantic intelligibility that the best of ordinary-language philosophy developed) is not in the business of solving this problem but rather—through bringing together a range of cases that might engender a sameness of vision—earning a kind of freedom from it. Does the fact that we can and do absolutely nothing when viewing through a telescope a distant mountaineer in trouble mean the humanly-engaged fear we feel for him is not real? Of course not: real emotions do not require as necessary conditions intervention-possibilities. Does it follow from the fact that we fear for the matador or driver mean we will leave the ring or track and never go again? Decidedly not. Do we sort the emotions, Cohen asks, of readers of the Bible into emotions felt by those who read it as factual history, those who read it as fiction, and those who are agnostic concerning its veracity? We do not—and this counts for a lot for Cohen. Nor do our practices—practices that this rare kind of philosophical book
shows genuine mastery at recounting in a multiplicity of philosophically
telling ways—conform to any such template. Cohen is in a position to
be struck by the rightness of Wittgenstein’s remark when he said ‘Don’t
take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and
fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds’ (*Philosophical
Investigations*, §524, quoted by Cohen at p. 38). Cohen sees, as what he rightly
calls ‘an intimately related fact’, that ‘people’s involvement in these stories
includes genuine feelings’ (p. 38). Some feelings—feelings of concern for a
friend in combat—can last for weeks, months, or years; others—concern for
the impending doom of Mrs Mulwray—can last for under two hours. Their
duration, we come to see here, is not a measure of their reality. And the
variable and wide-ranging identifications we form with characters like
Mrs Mulwray, identifications that, for Cohen, are ‘no different from the
variability we display when we come to like, love, dislike, hate, empathize
with, blame, and praise the real people who inhabit our real world’ (p. 78),
are dependent upon an ability that is identical to our capacity to use and
comprehend metaphor, to see one thing as another that it is not, to see a
thing we thought familiar in a new light. It is here that Cohen brings to center
stage the fact that there will be no formula, no method, no set procedure, for
grasping metaphorical content in context, just as there is no formula,
method, or set procedure for understanding persons or for creating a suc-
cessful and engaging work of art (pp. 85–6). Any attempt to describe such a
formula would be instructively misbegotten (one thinks here of Aristotle’s
admonition concerning the need to match the expectations concerning cate-
gorical neatness to the object at hand). What is surely not misbegotten is a
cultivated understanding of metaphors as ‘entrees to human understanding’
(p. 85), understanding that comes from—precisely what this marvellous
companion of a book provides—an intricate, detailed, and powerfully in-
sightful close study of cases of the metaphorical usages that engender an
irreducible, non-formulaic sense of what it is to recognize other persons,
to become able to see ourselves in them, and to become able to see them
in us. Cohen has given us, in wonderfully readable and analytically acute
form, an unforgettable study of a complexly interwoven set of linguistic,
perceptual, and imaginative abilities that not only make us who we are,
but make us who we are together.

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