Midrashic Metaphors about Metaphor

**Part 1 – Introduction**

What exactly are metaphors? How do they work? What do we do in order to process and understand them? In this paper, I hope to find, if not answers, then at least some hopeful suggestions, from the authors of the Midrash.

How to define the rabbinic genre known as Midrashic Literature is a matter of some controversy. Etymologically, ‘midrash’ denotes a certain mode of textual exegesis – a certain way of reading a text; a hermeneutic. But the term has subsequently come to refer to a whole body of rabbinic literature: classic collections, known as the Midrashim, arranged around verses of the Bible, whose authorship and redaction span from the second century all the way down to the thirteenth. Some of these texts, especially the early ones, concentrate primarily on Jewish law; squeezing, so to speak, legislation from the Biblical texts, using hermeneutical tools and a great deal of ingenuity. Other Midrashim, especially from the sixth century onwards, concentrate on non-legal, and more often than not homiletical, interpretations of the Biblical texts.

In the non-legal Midrashim, metaphors are ubiquitous. We should, of course, be careful here to note a difficulty in translation. Where, in English, we have distinct words for metaphors, similes, parables, and analogies, Rabbinic Hebrew grouped them all together under the term ‘mashal’ (plural: *mashalim*). I shall be careful to take this translational issue into consideration, wherever it seems relevant, as we go forward.

From the inception of the genre, non-legal Midrashim abounded in mashalim. Their form, structure and imagery became slowly regularized as the genre took shape, but their centrality to the non-legal Midrash seems to have been a constant feature of the genre throughout its long evolution.[[1]](#footnote-1) By the end stage of the literature, most of the mashalim took the form of parables in which God is described as a human King, engaging with his court, his subjects or his relatives. The purpose of Midrashic mashalim, and Midrash in general, is a major scholarly controversy. How serious were the authors of the Midrash in their purported task of interpreting the actual meaning of the Biblical texts? To what extent were they engaging in something akin to textual deconstruction? These are *not* the questions of this paper.[[2]](#footnote-2) Our concern is philosophical, not historical. The authors of the Midrash were experts in spinning metaphors. And thus, in their more introspective moments, they may well have a lot to teach us, as philosophers, about the nature of their primary tool; the nature of metaphor.

**Part 2 – The Detractors**

Two broad schools of thought have emerged, over the centuries, to claim that, for very different reasons, the linguistic phenomenon of metaphor is not worthy of independent philosophical scrutiny. On the one hand, we have the school of Hobbes and Locke. Hobbes thought that metaphors were at best word-play: the mere enjoyment of verbal dexterity.[[3]](#footnote-3) Locke went further in his condemnation of metaphor; he thought that they were dangerous and deceitful and that the whole art of rhetoric was infected with an immoral self-indulgence that detracted from the pursuit of truth and clarity. According to Locke, metaphors 'insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment, and so indeed are perfect cheats, and, therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided'.[[4]](#footnote-4)

If you are interested in passing on real and valuable information about the complex and often mystifying nature of the world, then that task calls for sobriety and clarity. Metaphor, and other rhetorical devises, may sweeten the experience of speech and writing, but gives rise to multiple interpretations, ambiguity and vagueness; philosophy, on the other hand, should be interested in rigour and precision. Metaphor is a surface imperfection of human language – an imperfection that speaks only to the emotions – and it ought to be eschewed by the hard sciences. Such, it seems, was the attitude of Hobbes and Locke; an attitude that found its way into the analytical tradition with Bertrand Russell's dream of a logically perfect language that gets away from all of the vagueness and multiplicity of meaning that can be found in *natural* languages.[[5]](#footnote-5) This anti-rhetorical agenda probably found its zenith in the Vienna Circle which branded as nonsense any use of language that didn't conform to their vision of a scientific language designed for the formal mapping of the empirical world. So, the first school of philosophical anti-metaphor contends that metaphor is an unfortunate verbal tick, worthy of eradication, but certainly not worthy of philosophical scrutiny.

The second school of philosophical anti-metaphor doesn't deny the importance or worth of the linguistic phenomenon but claims, instead, that it is too broad, or vague, a category to be worthy of *independent* exploration. If, for example, *all* language use was metaphorical, as Nietzsche seemed to think[[6]](#footnote-6) – if you'd struggle to find me an example of a non-metaphor – then, what would be the point of setting aside *metaphor* as a linguistic phenomenon worthy of independent exploration when, in fact, metaphor just is meaning? *All* (or the vast majority) of the philosophy of language, on such a view, would be the study of metaphor, and thus it wouldn't require an independent exploration in isolation from the study of the nature of meaning itself.

In the analytic tradition, Arthur MacIver was an early proponent of this view, arguing, in 1940, that one couldn't really draw a useful distinction between the metaphorical and the non-metaphorical.[[7]](#footnote-7) Embracing the view that metaphor constitutes an extension of the prior meaning of a concept, he claims that 'one of the commonest ways in which vocabulary is extended is extension of meaning by analogy, and that "metaphor" is the name that we give to this extension when it is so blatant that we notice it.' But, even when we don't notice it, the phenomenon is a nearly omnipresent feature of language. Even if we could create the utopic language of Bertrand Russell's dreams – a language that arbitrarily gave every object a unique non-metaphorical name, and every concept a unique non-metaphorical predicate – we would, MacIver argues, still be forced to *create* metaphors sooner or later – that is, to extend elements of this vocabulary in order to fit the world that just keeps on changing and growing around about us. Just as Newton extended the prior sense of the word 'force' in order to include the physical processes and relationships that he had discovered; we too would be compelled to extend the meanings of words in the 'utopic' language, and thus introduce metaphors, in order to keep the language in touch with the ever-expanding data pool that surrounds us.[[8]](#footnote-8)

MacIver envisages three ways in which we could try to sharpen the notion of a metaphor, to distinguish it from a non-metaphor, in order to create a realm of independent philosophical interest. However, he goes on to argue that each of the three methods for carving up the territory still leaves matters vague; each of them still leaves a grey area between the metaphorical and the non-metaphorical.

1. We could restrict the term 'metaphor' only for 'poetic' instances; that is to say, only for instances in which the speaker actually *intends* to draw a *comparison* between the old extension of the phrase, and its current, somewhat stretched application.
2. We could restrict the term to apply to 'live metaphors' rather than to 'dead' ones.
3. We could apply the term liberally to any phrase that was originally coined by extending a prior meaning.

MacIver points out that on suggestion 1, it will often be a subtle task to decipher whether an utterance was metaphorical or not. He imagines himself describing somebody, '"pecking away at the typewriter", where it may be hard to decide how far I am using the resemblance of his action to that of a pecking fowl simply to supply the lack of another word to describe the action, and how far I actually want to point out that resemblance.' So, suggestion 1 fails to draw a clear boundary.

Suggestion 2 likewise fails to create a stable and decisive distinction. Whether or not a metaphor is *alive* remains a subjective issue. On one occasion I might uncritically process the information that So-and-so has caught a cold. On another occasion, I might be more attentive to the strange imagery of the claim. Did he really *catch* a cold? Who threw it to him? Did he catch it in a fishing-net? Does this mean that a phrase can keep winning and losing its metaphorical status merely depending on the audience and upon how fertile their imagination is at the time in question?

Finally, MacIver claims that it follows from suggestion 3 that 'there may indeed be some words in some languages which are non-metaphorical — that is, which are still used in the senses which Adam gave to them in the Garden of Eden — but we have no means of telling which words they are, or whether there are any of them in any particular language, such as modern English'. And, he continues, on this definition of 'metaphor', it is much more likely that there are no non-metaphorical words, or a vanishingly small amount of them, left in our current language. As far as MacIver is concerned, metaphor isn't a philosophically interesting topic. Not because metaphor is deceptive, as Locke thought it was, but because it is too broad a class; all of language, with very few exceptions, is metaphorical. So there's nothing of particular interest here, other than our general interest in the nature of language.

In the continuation of this paper, we will explore one particular Midrash. Most Midrashim use parables and/or metaphors, or *mashalim*. This one is one of the few Midrashim that actually takes a sustained look at the *nature* of mashalim.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is a Midrash that challenges both of these schools of anti-metaphor. Against Locke and Hobbes, this Midrash suggests that metaphor is an important and worthy linguistic phenomenon, rather than some superficial and deceptive aberration. And, against MacIver, it claims that metaphors are distinctive; standing out starkly against a non-metaphorical linguistic background.

**Part 3 – The Midrash**

The Midrash in question is offered as an explanation of the first words of *The Song of Songs*. What does it mean to be *the* song of songs? Why, and in what respect, is this song better than all other songs? *The Song of Songs* is an extended mashal. On the surface, it is a love story between a man and a woman. In the rabbinic tradition, the book receives its holy status because it was regarded as a parable – an extended metaphor about the relationship between God and His beloved people, Israel. The Midrash seems to argue that since this extended Mashal was written by Solomon (who the Rabbis identified with Koheleth), and since Koheleth was the master of mashalim, *The Song of Songs* is worthy of its name: a song that is, in some sense or other, superior to all other songs. I now quote from the Midrash at length:

Had another person said [*The Song of Songs*], I would have had to incline my ears and listen to these words, 'And even more so' [echoing a verse from *Ecclesiastes* (12:9)] given that Solomon said them. Had he said them from his own mind, I would have had to incline my ears and listen to them, 'And even more so' given that he said them under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

[The full quote from *Ecclesiastes*:] 'And even more so: Because Koheleth was a sage, he continued to instruct the people. He weighed up, sought out, and established many maxims (*mashalim*)' (*Ecclesiastes* 12:9). [The Midrash explains the three stages of weighing up, seeking out, and establishing maxims]: [1] He weighed up words of Torah. [2] He sought out words of Torah. And [3] he made handles for the Torah. And one finds that before Solomon arose, there never was such a thing as a *dugma*.

The word 'dugma' is often used in rabbinic texts to mean 'example' – from the Greek, *degima*, an 'example' or 'pattern'. But, in this context, it seems clear that it is being used as a synonym of 'mashal.' And thus, Maurice Simon translates 'dugma' in this instance as parable.[[10]](#footnote-10) Before King Solomon, there were no parables. Solomon, according to this Midrash, invented parables. David Stern agrees with Simon's translation, [[11]](#footnote-11) as do all the classical Rabbinic commentaries.

Translation can't bring out the Hebrew word-play in this Midrash. The verb for 'weighing up' comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for the ear. Also, the Hebrew word for handle shares this root. And thus, there is word-play involved in Solomon's *weighing up* the words of the Torah and then creating *handles* for them. Handles look like ears, and, like ears, they were used, in ancient pottery, to make things balance (the handles were placed at the bottom of earthenware in order to add stability). The Midrash is claiming that having understood the words of the Torah, Solomon was the first person to cast its message into the form of mashalim (parables, metaphors and similes). Furthermore, this process is itself metaphorically described, by the Midrash, as attaching handles onto the Torah. We thus have our first Midrashic metaphor about metaphors: metaphors that encode the message of *x* are *handles* for *x*. The Midrash comes back to this metaphor in its continuation. I quote the remainder of the Midrash now, marking with subscript numbers the fact that the Midrash uses a corresponding number of different cognate words for 'understanding':

R. Nachman [gave] two [illustrations]. R. Nacham said it is like a large palace that had many entrances, and everyone who entered it got lost from the entrance. A wise man came and took a coil of string, and hung it on the way to the entrance. Thereafter, everyone came in and left by way of the coil of string. Likewise: until the rise of Solomon, nobody was able to understand1 words of Torah. And, after Solomon arose, everyone began to understand2 the Torah.

R. Nachman's second illustration: It is like a thicket of reeds that nobody was able to enter. A wise man came and took a scythe and cleared [a path]. Thereafter, everyone began to come in and leave by way of the path that had been cleared; so too with Solomon.

R. Yossi said: it is like a great basket of fruit, and it had no handles, and nobody was able to move it. A wise man came and made handles, and began to move it by way of [these] handles. Likewise: until the rise of Solomon, nobody was able to understand1 words of Torah. And, after Solomon arose, everyone began to understand2 the Torah.

R. Shila said: it is like a large jug of boiling water, and it had no handle [with which] to move it. A wise man came and made a handle for it and began to move it by way of its handle.

R. Hanina said: it is like a deep well full of water. And its waters were cold, and sweet, and good. But, nobody was able to drink from it. A man came along and tied string to string, and rope to rope, and drew from the well and drunk. Thereafter, everybody began to draw and drink [from it]. So to, [moving] from word to word, and from mashal to mashal, Solomon was able to understand3 the secrets of the Torah. As it is written, 'The Proverbs of Solomon, the son of David, King of Israel: [For learning wisdom and discipline; for understanding4 words of discernment' (Proverbs 1:1-2). [This means]: By means of his mashalim, Solomon came to understand3 the words of the Torah.

Our Rabbis say: don't look lightly upon the mashal. For, by way of the mashal, a person is able to understand3 the words of the Torah. It is like a king who lost some gold in his house, or a precious jewel. Doesn't he find it using a wick that's worth a penny? Likewise: you shouldn't look lightly upon the mashal because, by using the mashal, a person can understand3 the Torah. Know that this is so, for Solomon understood3 the subtleties of the Torah by way of the mashal.

And thus, this Midrash has given us seven metaphorical descriptions of Solomon’s mashalim:

1. Having weighed up and sought out the words of the Torah, Solomon was able to give it handles.
2. A coil of string left by a wise man in order to help people navigate their way through a labyrinthine palace.
3. A scythe used to cut a path through a thicket of reeds.
4. Handles for a basket of fruit.
5. Handles for a jug of boiling water.
6. A chain of ropes tied together in order to draw water from a deep well.
7. A cheap wick used to find precious jewels in the darkness.

Our task is to unpack these seven metaphors to reveal the competing theories of metaphor that they seem to presuppose or express. But, before we engage upon that task, it is worth exploring the different words that the Midrash uses for understanding.

**Part 4 – Understanding**

One of the phrases that the Midrash repeats – a phrase that therefore seems to belong in the mouth of the editor as much as it does in the mouth of R. Nachman and R. Yossi, in whose paragraphs the phrase appears – claims the following: ‘until the rise of Solomon, nobody was able to understand1 words of Torah. And, after Solomon arose, everyone began to understand2 the Torah.’ The strange thing about this phrase is that it doesn’t use a consistent terminology: it uses two different words for understanding. It implies that the sort of understanding that Solomon gave to the people wasn’t necessarily the sort of understanding that they had been searching for in the first place.[[12]](#footnote-12) The two verbs in question are understanding1, להשכיל, and understanding2, לסבור. These two verbs, despite being, to most intents and purposes, synonyms and having, in many instances, a seemingly identical usage, nevertheless come along with very different packages of nuances and etymological associations, as we shall see. And thus the message of the Midrash seems clear: there is one sort of understanding that people are generally in search of, or *were* in search of before Solomon invented *mashalim*, and there is another variety of understanding that mashalim can deliver to you.

One might, at this point, be tempted to note a passing similarity between this phrase of the Midrash on metaphor, with its distinction between two varieties of understanding, and Donald Davidson’s influential approach to the nature of metaphor. Central to Davidson’s account is the distinction between ‘seeing as’ and ‘seeing that’. This slippery and cryptic distinction of Davidson’s might be seen as an, obviously unwitting, echo of the Midrash’s distinction between understanding1 and understanding2 – both distinctions posit an epistemic stance that is somehow connected to literal discourse (understanding1 and *seeing that*) alongside a distinct epistemic stance that is somehow connected to metaphorical discourse (understanding2 and *seeing as*). Given that Davidson’s theory is more explicitly stated than anything in the Midrash, it might serve us well to explore Davidson’s distinction more thoroughly before comparing it to the distinction hinted to in the Midrash.

Davidson’s counterintuitive thesis is that a metaphorical utterance means nothing more than what the sentence uttered literally means. When I say that ‘the silence was pregnant’, my words mean just that; that the silence was pregnant. Davidson stands against those who claim that every metaphor has a hidden, metaphorical meaning behind the literal meaning; against those who claim that in order to understand a metaphor, one needs to perform the task of *translating* from the literal meaning to the metaphorical one. For Davidson, metaphors mean just what they say; what’s distinctive about a metaphor isn’t it meaning, it’s something else. Davidson brings a number of arguments to motivate his peculiar thesis. One of his central arguments has been usefully paraphrased by Marga Reimer in terms of the following *modus tollens*:[[13]](#footnote-13)

1. If a metaphor had a metaphorical meaning in addition to its literal meaning, then it would be possible to give literal expression to this (putative) meaning.
2. It is not possible to give such a paraphrase for a metaphor.
3. Conclusion: A metaphor has no special meaning above and beyond that which is expressed by its literal meaning.

In order to undermine this argument, we could claim that meaning, or, what we might want to call ‘cognitive content’, isn't always sentential in its form; if that's the case, then it won't be true that a meaning can always be given a literal expression. Echoing a critique of Richard Moran, Reimer suggests, 'Suppose that we … adopt an alternative conception of “proposition” such as Stalnaker’s … according to which something is propositional just in case it represents the world as being a certain way. On this sort of view, anything that represents the world as being a certain way—maps, pictures, memories—counts as propositional.' On Stalnaker’s account of propositional content, the first premise of Davidson’s argument turns out to be false. The argument is unsound.

Reimer's defense of Davidson is robust. Stalnaker’s conception of a proposition, or any close relative, is too broad. It forces us to lose a truly important distinction: 'the distinction between what a metaphor “intimates”—call it an “intimation”— and what a (declarative) sentence means. This distinction is rooted in the fact that metaphors are not amenable to literal paraphrase; metaphors are not “propositional” in this narrower sense.' The fact that some ways that the world is can be expressed in words, and some only in pictures or maps or memories, points to a fundamental distinction – a distinction that Stalnaker is ill-placed to draw – between propositional content (which we might call *meaning* or cognitive content) and non-propositional content (the stuff that only a picture can say). Indeed, it is clear that Davidson isn't really trying to deny that metaphors are representational; he isn’t trying to deny that Romeo was trying to represent the world in a certain way when he described Juliet as the sun, above and beyond the literal meaning of the sentences uttered. Davidson is, instead, trying to distinguish between propositional content and non-propositional content.

Some content is well placed to be expressed by propositions; some content isn’t, and it might even be deceptive to call it ‘content’, because that implies that it is some neatly delineated bundle of information, when in fact, we might be talking about something that has no formal end; hence the impossibility of paraphrasing a metaphor (or at least many metaphors). Metaphors are, according to Davidson, what we use when we want to represent something about the world that no proposition can contain. And thus, for Davidson, to talk about the metaphor’s meaning is deceptive; meaning is something quantifiable. The metaphor just means what the words say. We should, instead, be talking about the metaphor’s *point*. Why did Romeo say those odd words about Juliet being the sun? What was his *point*? What non-propositional features of the world was he trying to draw our attention to *without* saying, because no words can say them? And thus we arrive at Davidson’s distinction.

Sometimes we see *that x* is the case, and if so, we can report what we see in literal language: i.e., ‘I see that x.’ Sometimes, however, we see the world *as* *being* in some way. When we want to report what we see, if we’re *seeing as*, rather than *seeing that*, we have to use metaphor. The metaphor itself doesn’t *mean* what we intend to point to, instead we *intimate* towards what we see by using words that somehow cause others to see it too. But those words don’t mean what we see, because no words can contain what we see. And the point of uttering the words is to cause you to see what we see too. That’s why Davidson would rather talk about the *point* of a metaphor than its meaning. Of course, if you want to, you could call the metaphor’s point its ‘metaphorical meaning’. Davidson doesn’t want to quibble about what to call things. But his fear is that we lose an important distinction between the way that literal language works and the way that metaphor works if we fail to mark the difference between the cognitive content expressed by a sentence – i.e., its *meaning*, and the non-cognitive ‘content’ that we intimate towards with the peculiar use of words in a metaphor; words that often *mean* things that are obviously false; for instance, the silence wasn’t really going to have a baby. What’s interesting about a metaphor isn’t what its words mean but what its point was.

Despite having a fully-fledged and influential account of metaphors, Davidson doesn't give us much to go on in order to flesh out the epistemological distinction that seems to be underpinning his account. Eleonore Stump develops a similar epistemic distinction to Davidson's, and thankfully, she tells us more. She calls *knowledge-that*, Dominican knowledge; and *knowledge-as*, Franciscan Knowledge. Dominican knowledge is the classical form of knowledge that relates a knower to a proposition. Franciscan knowledge is the mysterious non-propositional type of knowledge that we don’t yet have a firm grasp over. The need for more than propositional knowledge was famously brought to our attention by Bertrand Russell and his principle of acquaintance. But, more recently, the notion of non-propositional knowledge has garnered interest in the wake of Frank Jackson's thought experiment about Mary.

The thought experiment concerns a neuroscientist called Mary. She knows everything there is to know about the brain (her neuroscience is much further advanced than ours). One of the things she knows is the exact ways in which the brain processes colour. But, evil philosophers have arranged it that from birth she was allowed no direct experience of colour. She was kept in a completely black-and-white environment, and covered, from head to toe in black and white clothing. Then, we're to imagine, after learning everything there is to know about the human brain from her black and white prison, she breaks free and experiences colour for the first time. Stump explains why this thought experiment seems to force upon us a category of non-propositional knowledge (p. 50-51):

Even though in her imprisoned state Mary has available to her a library containing a completed neuroscience, it seems clear that she comes to know something new when she first sees colors. But the problem is not just that no *neuroscience* books give her the knowledge she acquires when she first sees red. *No* books could give her this knowledge … That is why, when Mary first knows redness in virtue of perceiving it, it is hard to express what she knows adequately in terms of knowing *that* … So knowing a color is a candidate for a kind of knowledge which is not knowing *that*. And, clearly, there are various other first-person experiences that are equally difficult to capture as knowledge *that* or as the object of a propositional attitude. What it is like to be in pain, what it is like to feel lonely, what it is like to feel at home, and myriad other experiences involving qualia of some sort are further examples.

But, Stump develops a new thought experiment in order to illustrate a different category of non-propositional knowledge. It isn't only qualia that can be known in the Franciscan mode, 'there is also Franciscan knowledge of [other] persons' (p. 51). The thought experiment runs as follows:

Imagine then that Mary in her imprisonment state has had access to any and all information about the world as long as that information is *only* in the form of third-person accounts giving her knowledge *that*. So, for example, Mary has available to her the best science texts for any of the sciences, from physics to sociology. She knows that there are other people in the world, and (*mirabile dictu*) she knows all that science can teach her about them. But she has never had any personal interactions of an unmediated and direct sort with another person. She has read descriptions of human faces, for example, but she has never been face-to-face with another conscious person. She has read books that describe the process of human communication, including the role of melody in speech and body language; but she has never had a conversation of any sort with anyone, and she has never participated in any way, even as a bystander, in anyone else's real or imagined conversation. In short, Mary has been kept from anything that could count as a second-person experience, in which one can say 'you' to another person. And then suppose that Mary is finally rescued from her imprisonment and united for the first time with her mother, who loves her deeply.

Initially, Stump wants to draw the following conclusion. 'Although Mary knew her mother loved her before she met her, when she is united with her mother, Mary will learn what it is like to be loved.' This way of putting her own conclusion isn't all that helpful, because this knowledge is just another example of coming to know some qualia: the what-it-is-likeness of being loved. Later, it becomes clear that Stump's point is this. Mary doesn't just acquire the knowledge of what it is like to be loved. Nor does she acquire the knowledge *that* her mother loves her, which she had already. Instead, she comes to know, not *that* her mother loves her, but she comes to know her mother's love. This distinction, between (1) knowing that her mother loves her, and (2) knowing her mother's love, is illuminated when Stump considers some of the characteristic impairments of autism.

Simon Baron-Cohen and Uta Firth describe Autism as a deficit in the ability to construct a theory of other minds. People on the Autism spectrum seem to lack a skill that some psychologists call 'social cognition' and some philosophers call 'mindreading'. Baron-Cohen has coined the phrase 'mindblindness' to describe this pervasive feature of Autism. Peter Hobson, quoting Wittgenstein, describes this difference between a neurotypical child and a one with mindblindness: ''We [neurotypical people] *see* emotion' – as opposed to what? – We do not see facial contortions and *make the inference* that he is feeling joy, grief, boredom.' Stump puts his point thusly: 'For Hobson, we know the mental states of others not as knowledge *that* but more nearly by direct awareness, in the manner of perception, as it were.'

You can know that *p* is the case, or, you can be aware of *p*. These are quite distinct epistemic states. The autistic person might know that you are happy; he sees your face, and compares it with a chart he's been given to infer people's emotions, and he concludes that you're happy, but, he will struggle to be directly aware of your happiness; to see your happiness, so to speak – this is what mindblindness amounts to.Now we can better understand Stump's thought experiment about Mary. In her imprisoned state, she knows that her mother loves her; but she has never been directly aware of that love; not until she meets her mother. Stump's thought experiment and her appeal to Autism is designed to illustrate that non-propositional knowledge is a broad camp; it doesn't just include knowledge of qualia but direct knowledge of another person's mental states.

It is becoming increasingly clear to neuroscientists both that this sort of knowledge is mediated via a family of neurons knows as the mirror-neurons, and that 'people with autism have dysfunctional mirror neuron systems.' Mirror neurons were first discovered in the brains of macaques. It had long been known that a certain area of the macaque brain was responsible for controlling voluntary movements. What researchers discovered was that a subset of these neurons fired, not merely upon performing a certain voluntary action, but upon watching another monkey perform the same action. Mirror neurons were later found to exist in the human brain. And, not only was it found that we have mirror neurons in areas that control voluntary actions firing when we watch another perform those actions; we also have mirror neurons in parts of the brain associated with emotion. Parts of the brain associated with the emotional response of disgust, for example, have been demonstrated to fire when the subject sees that emotion expressed in the face, or actions, of another.

Scientists have struggled to express exactly what it is that these mirror neurons do. Some have said that when a subject views another person in certain emotional states, 'recognition is firsthand because the mirror mechanism elicits the same emotional state in the observer.' Stump picks them up on this: 'It is certainly not the case that every time a person observes the emotion of another, he comes to have that same emotion himself. But perhaps these researchers mean only that one can feel something of the emotion *as that other [person]'s emotion*.’ Other researchers have spoken of mirror neurons 'simulating' the mental states of others. Stump also has problems with this way of putting things. To talk of simulation is to reduce the phenomenon into some sort of first-person experience, but what the mirror neuron system really seems to give us is 'some sort of direct apprehension of someone else's mental state.' What the mirror neuron system delivers is what Stump calls 'second-person experience' – direct apprehension of another person *as a person*.

Whilst Stump doesn't link her epistemic distinction to metaphor, she does link it to stories and narrative. Appealing again to recent neurological research, Stump notes that the parts of the neurological visual system involved in the sight of rotating objects are also used when we imagine an object rotating. Stump speculates as follows: '[I]t might be that, when we engage with fiction, we also employ the mirror neuron system, but in an alternate mode, just as the visual system is employed in an alternate mode when we imagine the rotation of an imagined object.'[[14]](#footnote-14) Whilst second-person experience cannot be expressed propositionally (as illustrated by the second Mary thought experiment), 'we can do something to re-present the experience itself,' and that something is story-telling … A story takes a real or imagined set of second-person experiences of one sort or another and makes it available to a wider audience to share. It does so by making it possible, to one degree or another, for a person to experience some of what she would have experienced if she had been an onlooker in the second-person experience represented in the story.'

The content of Dominican knowledge can be conveyed by propositions. Second-person experiences, which are a sub-category of Franciscan knowledge, can't be expressed by propositions but can, to some degree, be recreated in others as they engage with a story. And thus Stump concludes that had Mary 'had available to her not only science books but also, for example, the works of Eliot, Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Angelou, and Achebe, or an array of the best movies and films of theatre productions, it is indisputable that her first experience with her mother would have been less of a surprise.' Davidson's epistemic distinction undergirded the differences between literal and metaphorical speech-acts. Stump's similar and more fleshed out distinction is used to undergird the difference between non-narrative prose and narrative. A lot of what Stump says resonates with the Midrash and its choice of words.

The Midrash had given us two verbs for understanding; one type of understanding, להשכיל, was associated with the literal; the other type, לסבור, with metaphor. It seems clear that, at least in this context, להשכיל refers to the classical, Dominican type of propositional understanding. But, what about לסבור? Analysis of its root throws up some fascinating suggestions. One of the earliest meanings associated with this root is 'demeanor' or even, 'facial expression.'[[15]](#footnote-15) A person's demeanor or facial expression is precisely one of the things that an autistic person, devoid of a theory of mind, will struggle to read. A later source, redacted in approximately the eighth century, uses this root to describe a 'master story-teller'.[[16]](#footnote-16) Stories are, according to Stump, the best means of 're-presenting' second-person experiences. Finally, an early meaning associated with this root is 'hope'.[[17]](#footnote-17) Hope is a peculiar propositional attitude because it doesn't answer to any sort of evidential burden. Optimism can be based on evidence. You can figure out the statistical chances of a good outcome and, if the chances outweigh the chances of a bad outcome, then your optimism is justified, otherwise, it isn't justified. But, hope is different. Hope doesn't speak to evidence. It is rational to hope for a good outcome even if you know that the chances are slim.

When you bundle all of these associations into the nuances of the verb לסבור, you get something very similar to Stump's notion of Franciscan knowledge; perhaps, had she not been a catholic, she would have called it, following this Midrash, Solomonic knowledge: an epistemic faculty that is peculiarly related to second-person experiences and to story-telling and story consumption; a faculty that doesn’t conform to conventional epistemic norms of evidence – many autistic people need evidence to infer that another person is happy; a neurotypical person sees that happiness directly, with no need for evidence based inference. But, the Midrash goes further, like Davidson, it suggests that Solomonic knowledge isn't just related to narrative; it's also related to metaphor. Perhaps this is why Autistic people, who have a deficit in this type of knowledge, typically fail to understand metaphor. But, just because the Midrash seems to agree with Davidson that the divide between the metaphorical and the literal is underpinned by a corresponding epistemic distinction, we shouldn’t be too quick to conclude that the Midrash adopts Davidson’s account of metaphor in its totality. It’s time to turn our attention to the seven metaphors that the Midrash presents about the nature of metaphors.

1. Cf., David Stern, *Parabales in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, Harvard University Press, 1991; especially pp. 34-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. If people are interested in these questions, they might want to begin their exploration with David Stern’s, 'Midrash and Indeterminacy', *Critical Inquiry*, 15/1 (1988): 132-161 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Part 1, Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, Chapter 10, §34. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*, Routledge Classics, 2010 – the transcript of lectures first delivered in 1918; cf., e.g., pp:25-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf., e.g., Lawrence Hinman, 'Nietzsche, Metaphor and Truth,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 43/2 (1982): 179-199 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A. M. MacIver, 'Metaphor,' *Analysis* 7/3 (1940):61 - 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mary Hesse explores the example of 'force' and advocates for the analogical nature of scientific theory in general: *The Structure of Scientific Inference*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. David Stern (*Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature*, p. 63) calls this Midrash, 'the most programmatic description of the mashal in all Rabbinic literature, and possibly the most extensive statement about a literary form that the Rabbis ever made.' [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Midrash Rabbah*, Volume 9 of 10, translated by Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, Soncino Press, 1983 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. David Stern, *Parables in Midrash*, pg. 300, fn. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The two translations of the Midrash that I have seen, Maurice Simon's and David Stern's, fail to mark this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 'Davidson on Metaphor,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXV (2001):142-155 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This speculation later received some empirical backing from researchers. Mmbemba Jabbi et al., 'A Common Anterior Insular Representation of Disgust Observation, Experience and Imagination Shows Divergent Fucntional Connectivity Pathways'; www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0002939 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mishna Avot 1:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Tractate Sofrim 16:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf., e.g., Bereshit Rabba 91:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)