



Metaphor as fundamental to future discourse



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ABSTRACT

In a time of information overload, increasing invasiveness, and questionable strategic coherence for individuals and collectivities, the question is whether metaphors have an especially important role to play. Thinking and engaging otherwise through metaphor therefore merits particular consideration. The argument focuses on the possibility of a meta-strategy by reframing the interweaving of themes through emerging implications of “meta” and “para”. This should enable forms of self-reflexive dialogue in “parameta space” to be envisaged.

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1. Introduction

In a time of information overload, increasing invasiveness, and questionable strategic coherence for individuals and collectivities, could metaphor have an especially important role to play? Any *in extenso* commentary on the possibility is necessarily also part of the problem, fruitfully to be recognized as its own metaphor in exploring the pattern that connects meaningfully.

In this spirit, the commentary can be used as an exercise in avoiding external referents. These are potentially as problematic for readers as for the publisher of a journal, typically challenged by hyperlinks, images, the new possibilities of animation, and copyright constraints. Such a convoluted exercise then corresponds to reported experiments of a group of mathematicians and poets who write texts avoiding use of the letter “e”, for example. More to the point, with everything supposedly connected to everything, how can such connectivity be navigated without external referents?

What can be fruitfully said without specific references to matters elsewhere—potentially behind paywalls, or requiring prior knowledge and/or appropriate security clearance? Does such a modality effectively constitute a form of metaphor for the identity and requisite sense of existence through which to engage with the future?

Is any reference to matters external to a dialogue space then to be construed as an indication of its fragmentation—or of potentially wider connectivity requiring embodiment otherwise? How is global sustainability to be achieved when challenged by obstacles to shared knowing? Are there forms of allusion and liminality which may suffice for that purpose? Avoiding verbose explication, can significance be usefully implied?

2. Thinking and engaging otherwise through metaphor

In a period when conventional modes of thinking are seemingly less than empowering or “fit for purpose”, metaphor offers a remarkable opportunity—one poorly explored to any systematic degree. It invites the question as to how many other

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ways of thinking might there be. As indicated by one early futurist, in a complex world it may offer the possibility of an integrative worldview which is otherwise elusive—and indeed we might be one ourselves.

In this spirit, those metaphors explored in previous writings first focused on moving beyond the strategically ubiquitous vision metaphor to the use of other senses and the polysensorial, otherwise fundamental to the navigation of reality. Another approach is to consider each species as offering such leads, as has been explored in the corporate world with respect to dolphins, dinosaurs, and the like. In the light of various traditions, nature more generally can be explored, especially water and its fluidity—but with the further implication of the complementarity of states of matter as indicative of a necessary complementarity in modes of knowing. Going further in that mode, is the cyclic connectivity between those states an important clue vital to engaging otherwise with environmental challenges? Especially intriguing is the sense that human identity, cognition and discourse can be better explored in terms of the subtlety of waveforms. Can one understand oneself to be a waveform, and what might this then imply?

Whilst metaphors derived from nature can be explored in this way, as is now characteristic of the emerging discipline of biomimicry, the possibility can be taken further by using technology as a source of metaphor through what can be termed technomimicry. A familiar possibility is offered by the gears of an automobile and its implications for changing conceptual gear—and the nature of a “gearbox”. Shift or automatic? Metaphor can be of great assistance in exploring contrasting conditions which prove so divisive in society, namely by offering insights into alternation between them. Again the contrast between automobile engines, based on two, eight, or more “strokes”, opens questions as to the nature of 8 and 12-stroke organizations. How many modes are required for different terrains? What are the design issues fundamental to flying—as might be vital for strategic initiatives to “get off the ground” and “fly sustainably”, or to acquire the escape velocity necessary for “stable orbit”?

Taking the argument further, is there any technological innovation which does not have potential cognitive implications meriting exploration? For example, of great interest are the innovations of Nicolas Tesla based on the rotation of the electromagnetic field as fundamental to visible forms of “enlightenment”. What do those insights suggest with respect to future creative management of perceptions of “positive” and “negative” which are currently so divisive in society? What indeed might be the implications of toroidal nuclear fusion reactor design for “cognitive fusion”—given the necessary disassociation from the walls of such a container for the reactor to function?

In a complex knowledge-based society, does astrophysics offer a rich and fruitful way to “re-cognize” the extreme distance between contrasting worldviews within an ever expanding communication universe? Having explored many such possibilities, the question emerges as to the degree of cognitive mirroring with such constructs of reality. Whilst much has been made of the container metaphor, this raises the question of the extent to which metaphor is itself a container with potentially paradoxical degrees of topological continuity between its “outside” and its “inside”, and thus between objective and subjective. More generally, does geometry offer a more extensive range of unexplored opportunities for cognitive organization than widespread conventional metaphorical use of “line”, “side”, “global”, and the like?

Most intriguing is why such possibilities are not explored to a higher degree in relation to “envisioning” the future, namely to imagining how it may be experienced otherwise and through what frameworks it might be variously organized. More specifically how might metaphor enable new forms of integrative discourse in an increasingly fragmented society—more fruitful engagement with otherness?

3. Information overload and information underuse: towards a meta-strategy?

How to handle information overload, with the lack of time or inclination to follow leads—especially given the opportunities and surprises of the unknown? Curiously the challenge takes a somewhat similar form for the global intelligence gathering services mandated to detect opportunities and threats in unimaginable quantities of information. With their processing power – as at Bluffdale – their focus is on pattern recognition through number crunching using supercomputers.

Less evident is to whom any meaningful patterns are then to be delivered and in what memorable form—given the constraints on attention time of policy makers? How are meaningful insights elicited, held and communicated? Can everyone then usefully consider themselves to be a “Bluffdale” having “global security” preoccupations—if only for themselves? Is everyone then faced with the challenge of being a “global brain”?

Much has been made of “meta-data” as the technical preoccupation of invasive surveillance and the ability to act on the intelligence so gathered. This is imagined to be the analytical key to the global information challenge of governance and security. For policy makers, how limited can be the information enabling a decision then held to be satisfactory?

This framing merits exploration as a metaphor for a form of communication minimalism, exemplified for individuals by the uptake of Twitter, the popularity of lyrics, and the role of aphorisms. Could “meta-for” be so considered in its own right—with respect to thematic content? The possibility is curiously prefigured by use of “surfing” and “browsing” as experiential descriptors. Is aesthetics indeed a factor in providing coherence through its mnemonic organizing role as in rhyme or rhythm, independently of reason?

With respect to global governance, there is a curious disconnect between the analytical focus on meta-data and any integrative metaphor through which strategy is framed, presented and debated. This situation is partially mirrored by the manner in which social media and internet discourse enable a degree of coherence through tagging—most notably hashtags. More questionable is then how the tweeting process enables coherence of larger scope—a “language of the birds” potentially

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