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ON THE UNDERSTANDING OF NON-LITERAL EXPRESSIONS

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"There is nothing wrong and nothing illogical in granting meaning to anything that people say with a feeling of understanding and which other people receive with a similar feeling"

Leszek Kołakowski 1982: 164

I

The following remarks should be treated as a discussion of a semiotic claim posed in the quotation above. Kołakowski opted for this rather radical perspective to challenge semiotic views prevailing in the analytical philosophy of that day. No wonder that his intellectual opponents felt obliged to take a stand. I once tended to side with his opponents, which is one of the reasons why I would like to take the emerging opportunity and revisit Kołakowski's argument. I won't be discussing the meaning of expressions in general, my purpose here is rather to, as the title suggests, bring into focus the meaning of non-literal expressions, particularly where they are supplied with inverted commas to imply their non-literal, metaphorical character. I chose to pursue this particular topic because there is little agreement as to what they actually mean.

I've written on the meaning of metaphorical expressions on many occasions, most extensively in my 1969 paper *O metaforze w filozofii* (Przełęcki 2002: 181-189). Elsewhere, in a 1998 paper entitled *Czy istnieją niewyrażalne treści poznawcze?* (Przełęcki 2002: 42-50), I was advancing an idea essentially conflicting with the semiotic claim proposed by Kołakowski. While trying

to establish the meaning of "X believes that p" I came to the conclusion that it can only make sense if p could be literally expressed in the language of X. I further claimed that our feeling of understanding of such non-literal expression is but an illusion if we have no means to express it in a literal way. This expression, I argued, could be meaningful to us only in a degree to which it can be expressed in discursive language, that is, a language that satisfies the condition of literalness, among others.

In contemporary discussions revolving around this problem, a clear and firm stand on the issue is taken by Adam Nowaczyk in his paper *O roli cudzysłowu w filozofii* ([On Inverted Commas in Philosophy] Nowaczyk 2001: 73-79). His argument centers on expressions used by philosophers in inverted commas to suggest their non-literal, metaphorical interpretation. If she stops short from discursive paraphrase of what was said, the philosopher "abdicates responsibility for her own words," argues Nowak. A responsible philosopher always offers a paraphrase that is "free from understatements and eligible for literal interpretation."

How do things stand, then? Is the feeling of understanding enough to grasp the meaning of a non-literal expression, or do we also need to have its literal paraphrase ready at hand? And what exactly would be the difference between the SENSE OF UNDERSTANDING and UNDERSTANDING proper? Before we can set about answering these questions, it appears that we first need to draw a distinction between the feeling of understanding and understanding proper. We must also bear in mind that there are various types of non-literal expressions along with various contexts in which they can be found. Since in the present circumstances I have no THEORY to fall back on, all I can do is offer here some loose and partial remarks.

First, it must be said that the SENSE OF UNDERSTANDING can be described as at least two mental states. I have a feeling of understanding of any given expression w if:

1. I vaguely believe that I understand w;

2. I understand w in a certain way.

While (1) is a conviction that I understand w, (2) is a certain way of understanding
w.[1] A closer look at those notions would obviously prompt questions about the

[1]In his study titled *O rozumieniu* [On Understanding], Jacek Jadacki (1989) notes that each of those mental states can be either actual or dispositional. He also takes a critical look at the idea of treating the "feeling of understanding" as a subjective condition of "understanding."

actual meaning of VAGUE BELIEF in (1) or UNDERSTANDING appearing in (2). VAGUE BELIEF generally underlines uncertainty, something opposed to firm belief. It would be more difficult to say what "feeling" actually means in (2), and what "feeling of understanding" contributes to "understanding" in general, and if so, what would be the difference between the two. Thus, the primary purpose of these considerations will be to compare those two notions.

For non-literal, or metaphorical expressions, this comparison seems to be particularly important. Put simply, I'm inclined to say that understanding of the metaphorical expression w and the feeling of understanding of such an expression can be both construed as types of understanding, conceived in the broadest way possible. Understanding follows on from understanding of a literal paraphrase of w, while the feeling of understanding follows on from the unmediated understanding of w, without literal paraphrase standing in between. It's key to construe the feeling of understanding of w as understanding in general. Those who have the feeling of understanding of w actually understand it in a certain way, even if it cannot be expressed through a literal paraphrase. One must already have some sort of understanding of a metaphorical expression before one comes up with its literal paraphrase, this is because one first needs to know what this literal paraphrase actually means. Precisely this preliminary, unmediated, or intuitive kind of understanding would in my opinion qualify as "feeling of understanding."

Since understanding of metaphorical expressions is what we are trying to get hold of here, let's briefly describe what metaphorical expressions are about (in doing so, I will largely reiterate conclusions of my paper titled *O metaforze w filozofii* [On Metaphor in Philosophy]; Przełęcki 1969). If saying that S is M qualifies in a language as a deviation foreign to the competent user of language (it being, for example, patently false), then at least one of the terms used in the expression, let it be M, is used in a metaphorical way. Generally speaking, Mused metaphorically means here that one used a term more general than M, one broader in scope but holding less clear content, which, if applied to S, would not cause the sentence to be a deviation (especially one considered to be patently false). So, using "S is M" metaphorically, all we say about S is that it possesses only some of the qualities attributable to M. What would such qualities be? First and foremost, the qualities that are part of M's meaning, that is, the qualities through which one would define M. However, while using M metaphorically to describe S, it's often the case that we attribute to S some qualities which, instead of being part of M's meaning, are rather related to M in a logical or

factual manner, those qualities being, for example, attributable to typical designates of M or its proverbial qualities. When Mickiewicz chooses to describe the steppe as an "ocean," what he does is to emphasise such oceanic qualities as "infinitude, desolateness, wave like motions of the surface, etc." When Pascal calls man a "reed," what he means is that human beings are fragile organisms.

It's important to stress that literal meanings of particular constituents of the expression are simply not enough to understand metaphorical meaning of the whole. Being able to speak the language is simply not enough to properly grasp the metaphorical meaning of an expression. First, one must be familiar with the context in which the expression features. Then, we usually need to be aware of the extra-linguistic circumstances of the spoken word. This immediate environment aside, however, our interpretation is also clearly influenced by something we could call one's cultural literacy, that is, whether one is aware of the references made and possesses the ability to interpret them accordingly. The better one navigates in this terrain, the smoother the interpretive process.

These considerations shed some light on what is usually thought to be the crucial difference between understanding of a metaphorical expression and merely having the feeling of its understanding: the former is perceived as intersubjective, while the other as subjective. In order to understand a metaphorical expression, that is, its literal paraphrase, it's enough to speak the language in which this paraphrase is articulated. Any competent speaker of this language is capable of this, not least the addressor and the addressee of the expression. In this sense, understanding is intersubjective. In opposition to this, in the case of ametaphorical expression, feeling of understanding requires something more than the mere command of language because it transcends the language in a sense that it gives metaphorical expression a new meaning that previously wasn't there. Which is why, as said earlier, linguistic context, particular circumstances, as well as interpretive skills as a part of cultural competences of the addressee all play their part in the interpretive process. Those elements are subjective and may differ in various human beings, not least in the addressor and the addressee who, in consequence, may have different feelings of understanding of one and the same expression. Those two mental states are virtually incomparable until each of them is expressed literally through a paraphrase. But then, if we were to follow our definitions, the feeling of understanding turns here into understanding proper.

Apart from its intersubjectivity, understanding has another advantage

that the feeling of understanding has not. It's brought up by Nowaczyk who argues that "in literal interpretation, we are relying on conventional syntactic and semantic connections already working in language; they determine truth-relationships between sentences, or, put another way, their logical relations" (Nowaczyk 2001: 7). Those relations remain elusive for those who, failing to articulate metaphorical expression's literal interpretation, have only its feeling of understanding.

This clear advantage begs the question whether, and if yes, why, the state where one has merely the feeling of understanding would be acceptable or tolerable. The usual answer to this question points to troubles encountered while trying to come up with the literal paraphrase, as well as the incurable inadequacy it eventually offers. Worn-out metaphors aside, which aren't really metaphors anymore, it's almost impossible to grasp the literal meaning of a metaphor, even if contexts, circumstances, and competences are all accounted for in the interpretive process. When I say something about S using M in a metaphorical way, it's practically never entirely clear which qualities of M are attributed to S. If I want to stand by metaphorical meaning of the predicate, I cannot unambiguously settle for a single literal paraphrase. At best, if at all, its meaning can be shown by selecting a class of such paraphrases, where each would be treated as acceptable interpretation of the original expression. Furthermore, such a class would never be unambiguously determined in advance: there are some paraphrases of a metaphorical text where it would be difficult to judge which ones are considered to be legitimate. This leads us to the conclusion that meaning of a typical metaphorical expression can never be unambiguous. And this is also where it doesn't compare with literal expressions.

This is not to say that such a vague expression possesses no cognitive value, by which I mean its truth-value. There've been various attempts to attribute truth or falsity to metaphorical expressions by interpreting the musing of a particular class of literal expressions. One of those proposals (corresponding with the so called supertruth theory) treats metaphorical expressions as true when all of its interpretations are true, and as false when all of its imaginable interpretations are false; otherwise, the expression is treated as having no truth-value at all. Some propose to treat metaphorical expression as true when the alternative of all of their imaginable interpretations is true, or to put it another way, only when its weakest interpretation is true. If it happens to be something else, it's false. It seems that on their own both of those proposals stand to reason and can work if provided with an appropriate theoretical context.

Our discussion so far has been built on the assumption that there are two kinds of broadly conceived understanding of metaphorical expressions: understanding of their literal paraphrase and unmediated feeling of understanding found in its non-literal and metaphorical form. Without unmediated feeling of understanding to rely on, we would be at a loss coming up with its literal paraphrase as we must know in advance what it is that we want to express literally. If it was any different we would have no reference point to measure its adequacy. This can be best observed when one is trying to come up with an adequate paraphrase: one is usually struggling to find the phrase that would ideally pin down this unmediated metaphorical meaning of the expression one is seeking to paraphrase. This approach goes against the standpoint presented at the beginning of this paper, according to which metaphorical expressions can only be understood through their literal paraphrases. One must resort to it, however, if one wants to compare what two different users of language, the addressor and the addressee, for example, make of one and the same metaphorical expression. But with feeling of understanding, the most we can do is guess while considering external and internal circumstances in which the addressor and the addressee happened to use the expression.

In light of those remarks, the claim made by Kołakowski quoted at the beginning of this paper allows for interpretations that one would find difficult to disagree with. If it's indeed so that the feeling of understanding of an expression is to be considered as a kind of its understanding, such expressions must necessarily be meaningful because one cannot understand something which has no meaning at all. But before we can attribute this or other meaning to the expression, a meaning which would be therefore by necessity determinate, the feeling of understanding possessed by the addresser must correspond with that of the addressee, it must be, to quote Kołakowski, "similar." But this, as we could see with the metaphorical expression, is difficult to establish, only literal paraphrase can provide us with the certainty we need.

II

These general remarks on the understanding of non-literal expressions call for various clarifications, I will try to include some of them in my further discussion. While speaking about non-literal expressions I essentially narrowed down my inquiry to metaphorical expressions because in my view it's the most important kind of non-literal expressions. When we supply expressions with Inverted comas to suggest their non-literal meaning, we

usually treat them as metaphors. Some note, however, that such expressions may also hold other figures of speech like metonymy or synecdoche. It appears, however, that we may treat them as kinds of metaphorical expressions. What's more, they easily lend themselves to interpretation as they are usually highly conventional and thus quite simple and trivial. The same goes for symbol and allegory sometimes used in philosophical texts.

That said, one other figure of speech, the simile, deserves a closer look as it's used to express various statements, also in philosophical discourses. Instead of metaphorical expression discussed here so far, S is M, one often uses a simile S is like M (or, S is as if it were M). The meaning of such simile is regarded as identical with that of metaphorical expression. It asserts a certain likeness between S and M, where S can be attributed particular qualities of M (in S is as if it were M only a limited number of qualities of M can be attributed to S since the very wording of such simile precludes that S is M). Similarly to a metaphorical expression, a simile is essentially ambiguous: it's difficult to tell which qualities of M in particular can be attributed to S. But the source of ambiguity is here different. In S is M it's the metaphorical meaning of M which is the source of ambiguity. But in the case of S is like M, the expression is considered to be literal: M is used here in its ordinary meaning. It's rather the elliptical nature of this expression and the understatement which follows that are responsible for its ambiguity. By saying S is like M, we are not specifying in what ways and to what degree S is similar to M. Interpretation should clear up things a bit here, it generally should be similar to interpretation of metaphorical expressions, particularly in regard to its broadly conceived linguistic and circumstantial contexts. Despite sourcing material from those various contexts, however, there will always be some degree of ambiguity left, as it would in the case of metaphorical expressions.

Apart from metaphors and similes, one other figure of speech often perceived as a vehicle for philosophical thought is analogy, found particularly in religious metaphysics. In my view, however, an analogy in this regard is not that different from a simile, rather some kind of it. There are, admittedly, some highly particular theories of analogy, but I think they have little to contribute to our present discussion.[2]

[2]Such a theory was proposed by Jan Maria Bocheński who treats analogy between various empirical relations (pertaining to human beings) and the corresponding metaphysical relations (pertaining to a deity) as an isomorphism of those relations. In my study *Poza granicami nauki* [Beyond Borders of Science] (Przełęcki 1996), I attempted to demonstrate that this interpretation fails to deliver on its promises.

Considering semantic imperfections of non-literal expressions which I am signalling here, that is, their subjectivity and ambiguity, begs the question whether, and if so, when, such an expression can be used in a legitimate way. In what kinds of philosophical texts would they be welcomed? I have already formulated an answer to this question, in which I differentiated between scientific philosophy and the so-called literary philosophy, or broadly conceived existential philosophy, arguing that in the latter non-literal language is perfectly acceptable. The difference between these two is that scientific philosophy deals with purely descriptive claims, whereas existential philosophy prefers value judgments of an emotive and prescriptive nature. Scientific philosophy is expected to come up with "theories" of the reality, while existential philosophy is meant to provide "visions" of the world and human life, shot through with an evaluative approach. To convey those visions, the philosopher speaks through mental states where cognition, emotion and volition all merge, striving to evoke states which are subjective, subtle and deep, something which cannot be achieved through literal terms. This is the reason why the philosopher sometimes resorts to far-flung metaphors and similes. Wielding her literary prowess, the author can enliven metaphorical expressions and evoke in the reader an acute feeling of understanding of what is actually said. Pascal or Nietzsche do just that. Besides, metaphorical expressions often serve as shorthand or summary of paragraphs where thought is discussed at length and in a more straightforward way.

Non-literal expressions behave differently in what I have called here, perhaps with a bit of a stretch, "scientific" philosophy. This philosophical discipline includes in my view primarily ontological conceptions such as various philosophical theories of being. If they are really supposed to be genuine "theories," they should be formulated with as much literal language as is only possible. As we remember, this is also the suggestion put forward by Nowaczyk, who calls for the philosopher to clarify with a literal paraphrase any expression used in inverted commas. He goes on to point out that, for example, this requirement is not met by Thomism, whereas Heidegger openly disagrees with this approach and uses as key concepts of his ontology such phrases as "the being of beings" or "being-towards-death," which by their very design are meant to be ambiguous.

Here we can see, however, one difference between those two Heideggerian concepts. For someone who accepts conditions for understanding postulated by Nowaczyk, "the being of beings" would indeed be unacceptable. But "being-towards-death" seems different. The phrase "man is a being-towards-death" is essentially a rather spectacular aphorism summing up reflections

on human condition, which only when considered as a whole lend to the phrase a graspable sense (Heidegger 1996, part II, chap. I, § 51). Put in that way, however, rather than part of ontology, the phrase belongs to philosophical anthropology (or, to borrow from Heidegger himself, "hermeneutic of Being"). What is important here is that on this interpretation, it ceases to be purely descriptive and becomes valuative instead, postulating an ideal of "authentic" man while condemning his "fall into inauthenticity." It's therefore not an element of philosophical "theory," but rather functions as a part of philosophical "vision" of human condition. It's also worth noting, that some ontological philosophical claims articulated in non-literal language have similarly "wholesale" nature. Their interpretation must take into consideration its whole context which often happens to be quite broad. Taking these claims and interpreting them out of those contexts may be rather unsatisfactory.[3]

What would be, then, the main conclusion to draw from our considerations? First and foremost, it seems that non-literal expressions such as metaphors do possess certain meaning, regardless of our inability to come up with their literal paraphrase. They have meaning by virtue of our feeling of understanding of those expressions. We need to possess it before we can set about articulating its literal paraphrase. If we succeed, we not only possess the feeling of understanding but also what we have called understanding proper. It differs from the feeling of understanding in that it's intersubjective, among other things, which gives it a methodological advantage over the, merely subjective, feeling of understanding. This advantage in itself is a good reason for providing, where possible, literal paraphrases of metaphorical expressions. However, we face particular difficulties in making good on this requirement when we encounter claims advanced by existential philosophy, which through their "valuative" visions seek to penetrate hidden dimensions of human condition. I believe that the relevance of such a philosophy for our lives is a redeeming feature which absolves it from its methodological deficiencies.

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[3]It appears, therefore, that some objections raised against Carnap's famous critique of Heidegger are legitimate.

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