CULTURAL UNIVERSALS: SO WHAT?

The necessity of the recognition of cultural universals by Christian Scholars

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ABSTRACT

The search for the elusive "cultural universals" in a variety of academic disciplines has been motivated by the spectre of relativism in its diverse guises. The problem of relativism has been thrust upon us inter alia by the inability of our epistemological models to account for social and cultural, moral and cognitive diversity and to provide us with criteria by means of which to judge aberrations like ideologies.
Contrary to the general trend I would like to argue that it is not the spectre of relativism in its various guises which necessitates the search for cultural universals, nor is this the only motivation for a Christian to argue in favour of the recognition of cultural universals. Various authors have suggested that such universal structures do exist; that they condition human and societal behaviour and that it would in principle be possible to construct a theory of these structural universals or a "biogrammar" or "geography" of the universal cultural acquisition device of humankind (cf. Harre,1976, 32; Johnson, 1987: xxxvii; Tiger and Fox,1974:17,30). Cross-cultural research in both psychology and anthropology has pointed to the existence of such traits, and in recent philosophical discussions Apel and others have pointed to the necessity of recognizing the existence of some sort of "transcendentalia".
These arguments emphasize elements that are common to diverse approaches to the problem of cultural universals. Christian scholars could accept most of these arguments as valid and yet argue in favour of a very specifically modified version of the notion of cultural universals. This essay attempts to develop such a position.

The argument in favour of the necessity of the recognition of the cultural universals by Christians, will be developed from two different angles:

The first argument will depart from an account of the nature of metaphor. The second argument will be a defence of the position that a Christian account of the structures assumed as basic to all human categorization and classification of the world, will confessionally link these structures with God's Word for reality.

1. THE NATURE OF METAPHOR

Metaphors and universals

Metaphor, conceived as a pervasive mode of understanding and one of the main cognitive structures by which we are able to have coherent, ordered experiences, necessitates an account of the basic conditions of human experience, meaning, and knowledge formation in which the existence of cultural universals is recognized. A view in which there is recognition of the fact that the underlying classificatory system on which metaphorical reference is based represents more than a sociologically determined semantic reality, requires a theory of universals which provides an account of the "grounding" of categories and classifications in the universal, cultural experience of human beings. All human experience is conditioned by such preconceptual and prelinguistic basic level categories and the recognition of the existence of such categories is necessitated by the following four arguments:

- The mere possibility of cross-cultural communication,
- the phenomenon of sort-crossing, category mistakes and semantic conflation,
- a "realist" interpretation of scientific theorizing, and
- the "metaphorical" nature of human understanding, cognition and experience.

These arguments are incorporated in one central thesis which has as its focal point the grounding of the cognitive meaning of metaphors in human experience. This, I believe, will provide evidence for the necessity of the recognition of the existence of universals.

This argument is developed in opposition to traditional Objectivist (as succinctly formulated by Bernstein, 1983; Johnson, 1987) so-called "God s-eye" views of meaning. I want to argue for the recognition of the existence of cultural universals, but I do not interpret them in the traditional objectivist sense as standing outside human experience or over and against the subjective "mirroring" activity of the human mind (Rorty, 1980). Such an approach forces one into the uncomfortable position of claiming to be able to determine when subjective representations adequately represent objective reality - a feat which cannot be accomplished.

A very specific modified notion of "universals" is at stake here, one that differs considerably from the traditional Aristotelian, so-called "absolute" theory of universals.[1] I shall adumbrate this modified notion of "universals" briefly by discussing Hesse and Harts' views.

Hesse develops an anti-realist position concerning universals. She rejects the "absolute theory" of universals, which she claims to have evaded (or solved?) by the development of an alternative to the traditional view of universals, based on a version of Wittgenstein's "family resemblance" view. In opposition to traditional views of metaphor, which resorted to some grounding in natural kinds or universals to which language is related, Hesse "anchors" metaphorical reference in the semantic network of the language. She rejects the Aristotelian theory of universals (which she calls the "absolute theory") which views metaphor as the transposition of a name that properly belongs to something else (Hesse, 1984:28) and resorts to Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" and to the conventional nature of judgements concerning similarities and differences as an alternative. The "family resemblance" account of universals implies that no meanings are univocal, she argues. The rules underlying the correct applications of meanings and underlying meaning relations must be sought. In her (Hesse, 1985/6) exposition of an intentional view of meaning and an alternative to the traditional view of metaphor which resorted to some grounding in natural kinds or universals to which

[1] This argument has been developed extensively in Botha, 1986.

language is related, she anchors metaphorical reference in the semantic network of language in which classifications and categories grow through "experience" and "commerce with the world". In her exposition of the family resemblances and the way in which the recognition and learning of these resemblances take place she appeals to notions such as "the same experience...", "shared assumptions", "the same physiology", "the same cultural expectations", "irreducible perceptions" that are a function of "our physiology and its commerce with the world". In spite of her recognition of these "objective realities" to which language is related she opts for a moderately realist position. Her motivation is clearly the fact that our knowledge of these objective realities is limited, seldom definitive and always open to correction. By and large this is an assumption usually shared by anti-realist thinkers, yet it would be possible to subscribe to this same fact and still be sympathetic to a realist position. McMullin (1984: 35) e.g., maintains such a position.

To the question how we would know what we are talking about when confronted with the instability of meaning found in language in general, she says: "Members of a class are not identical realizations of an ontologically backed class-term, they are loosely grouped by relations of similarity and difference into fuzzy, overlapping and temporarily defined classes whose boundaries change with experience and cultural convention" (1985/6:7; 1976: 8). She claims that in spite of the instability of meaning in language and the absence of universals, communication is still possible, because much of the experience and convention is in common - these shared assumptions indeed constitute a language community. Learning and recognition of terms referring to certain states of affairs come about by a web of similarities and differences - irreducible perceptions - which are simply the "function of our physiology and its commerce with the world" (1985/6:8). She says : " ...'similarity' and 'difference' are not themselves universals, because there are no universals. So they must be judgments made on particular occasions by particular perceiving beings". This leads her in the direction of an anti-realist position, which she characterizes as "moderate realism".

To my mind the recognition of the fluidity of language and semantic change which, for example, moves Hesse to argue against the traditional notion of universals does not warrant the conclusion that there are no

(contextual) conditions for predication and denomination, other than those imposed by the fluctuating semantic network of the language or mere social conventions. Semantic change and the possibility to recognize it is conditioned by more than semantic realities. Hesse seems to be aware of this fact when she points to the irreducible primary relations of difference and similarity. Moreover, these irreducible primary relations seem to be contextually determined.

Hart's (1984) formulation of the problem of the universals is helpful in this respect. He argues that the "universals" should not be interpreted as universal entities that are instantiated and exemplified, but as structural conditions for the existence of empirical reality. These structural conditions are the bases of the irreducible primary relations such as similarity and difference in reality and also provide the bases for the possibility of linguistic predication and denomination. Each particular entity in our world has both individual and universal traits which are characteristic of all of its existence (Hart, 1984: 18). In his ontology of universality Hart (1984) argues that the universality of the universals may point to something nomic, i.e. that all the various concepts used in talking about universals have in common that particulars must relate to them in a certain way if they are to be the particulars they are (Hart, 1984: 35). Concepts are therefore linguistic expressions of one s understanding of individual and particular existents. These are recognized as belonging to certain categories or groups on the basis of (prescientific or scientific) experiential knowledge. The conditions are not only characteristic of reality, but also provide the basis for the general modes of experience which warrant stability and the possibility of change.

A modified notion of universals provides a different avenue to approach the problem of the existence of cultural universals. This approach with its appeal to nomic conditions that point to the fact that metaphorical reference is anchored in more-than-semantic-reality is of course still confronted with the question concerning the proof of the existence of these nomic conditions. It could be argued that we still have no other access to these conditions than the linguistic conventions of our own culture. When confronted with this challenge, various avenues present themselves as possible answers: One is a "retreat to commitment", i.e.

that one claims to believe that such conditions do exist. The other is an appeal to experience, which could be evidentially supported by scientific research. Obviously these approaches need not be mutually exclusive. From the phenomenon of cross-cultural communication another strong argument in favour of the recognition of cultural universals can be derived.

Cross-cultural communication

Cross-cultural communication of even the most trivial and elementary nature presupposes common standards of rationality, albeit only the common acceptance of rules of inference and logic; moreover, communicaton itself presupposes that core criteria like truth and validity are not context-dependent and variable, but universal and fundamental (Lukes, 1970: 208; Jarvie, 1975: 351). Lukes (1970: 209 210) points to the fact that the existence of a "common reality" is a necessary precondition for our understanding of a foreign language and that there should at least be some clarity concerning the basic distinction between truth and falsity before any attempt at understanding and translation could be made. It follows that a foreign language must minimally possess criteria of truth(as correspondence to reality) and logic, which we share with it and which are simply criteria of rationality.

To understand the utterances of an alien culture with a radically different language, we need to be able to relate these utterances to the world. This requires a "bridgehead" with the radically different culture which at least assumes that perception of everyday objects is the same in both cultures and that the manner in which predication and denomination of these distinct objects would take place would be similar to the one used in our own culture. This bridgehead would imply that even though we don t understand the foreign language, we assume that trying to conceive of a culture with a language which did not have conceptions of negation, identity and non-contradiction is an absurdity (cf. Lukes, 1970; Hollis, 1970; Nielsen, 1974).

Sort-crossing and category mistakes

An adequate theory of metaphor must give account of the basic domains of experience and their interrelationship, but will also have to explain

the basis for the distinction between inherent and interactive properties which function in the definition of concepts and metaphorical language use. Literal meaning is as much context-bound as metaphorical meaning, although the context is generally so much part of our background beliefs that we fail to recognize it as context (Kittay, 1987:97). Such a differentiation at least requires some guidelines for the identification of contexts and the determination of "improper" context-crossing (sort crossing) or context mistakes (category mistakes). Not only do these experiential contexts guide and condition our everyday experience of reality and make it possible to identify errors and mistakes, but the articulation of these contexts in a philosophical ontology provides a framework for the determination of semantic conflation (Spragens, 1973:41) in scientific concept formation - in order to avoid becoming the victims of a situation in theorizing when "metaphors becomes myths" (Turbayne, 1970:28). Such a framework can not be provided when metaphors are only anchored in the fluctuating semantic network of language. This argument is based on the assumption that the world commonly shared by diverse cultures has a universal and commonly recognizable structure which presents itself to the participants of diverse cultures in a common way. This causal structure of the world or the "joints" (Boyd, 1980:408), can be approximated in diverse cultural languages.

This argument in favour of cultural universals is not motivated by the imperative to establish a correspondence between culturally localized beliefs and opinions and alleged culturally transcendental answers (cf. Jarvie, 1975: 347), but to argue that human experience and knowledge is universally conditioned by the same basic structural givens.

Metaphorical models in scientific theorizing

I wish to argue that both the irreducible primary relations of similarity and difference and their contextual qualifications are structural realities or "ontological constants" (Levy, 1981: 31) which are approximated in theorizing by hypothetico-structural explanation (McMullin, 1978: 139). In the approximation of these structures (also formulated as "functional analogies" (Hart,1984)) or "necessary metaphors" (Snell, 1953) found in reality, metaphors play a constitutive role. Successful scientific theorizing in which metaphorical models play a constitutive role and which

lead to the progressive uncovering of the causal features of the world, point to the fact that at least certain types of metaphorical constructions are based on unavoidable analogical states of affairs in reality which must be common to diverse cultures; otherwise scientific communication across language and cultural barriers would not be possible.[2]
Conceptual problem-solving is an essential dimension of scientific rationality. Metaphor leads to concept reformulation (Rothbart, 1984: 611).[3] Concept formation takes place around members of a domain sharing some prominent features with some prototype members. This leads to a contextual classification of objects. Metaphoric projection reorganizes the semantic field by introducing new saliencies into the field by highlighting some features and eliminating others. This leads to the formulation of new attributes that can be directly beneficial when a conventional field of concepts fails to permit certain desirable features to emerge. Assuming that a conceptual problem is some weakness within the system of concepts, the gain from metaphor is expansion of the range of possible features attributable to the subject. This leads to a displacement of concepts (Schön, 1963).

Conceptual novelty which provides some epistemic access to hitherto unknown domains and to successful structure mapping, is an articulation of a whole series of expectations about the manner in which certain aspects of the world do behave or function. The systems, objects or items covered by a certain new concept share overlapping similarities. In the case of scientific concept formation these "family resemblances"

[2] "Localized mathematics, localized science and localized morality are simply not mathematics, science and morality in the sense we intend and to which we aspire" (Jarvie, 1975: 347).

[3] Soskice's (1985:102) distinction between "theory-constitutive" metaphors, i.e. metaphors which propose a model, and metaphors which are linguistic projections of such a model, is helpful in this respect. In order to differentiate the two types of metaphors, she suggests a useful distinction between "theory-constitutive metaphors" and "metaphorically constituted theory terms" (1985: 102).

are most probably instances of "functional analogies" (Hart, 1984) which point to basic and underlying ontological analogies. In the approximation of these functional analogies scientific imagination is the vehicle for the creative opening up of novel insights into the structure of the world and also for the generation of new meaning; meaning which often is not already contained within the semantic network of the language systems utilized to conceptually formulate the anticipated similarities. Evidence from various disciplines and from human experience in general points to the fact that human experience and human cognition are mediated by preconceptual image-schematic structures (Johnson, 1987) of an analogical and metaphorical nature, which are apparently common to diverse cultures in spite of linguistic diversity.

Metaphors and experience

Metaphor represents a new way of seeing or a new context which generally is the result of the interaction between at least two domains or contexts. These "domains" and semantic fields cannot be imputed purely to social and cultural conventions reflected in linguistic usage but the meaning of the metaphor-in-context is constrained by structures of experience which in turn are limited by the boundary conditions set by the structure of reality which conditions human experience.

This means that metaphorical concepts have experiential grounding in basic domains of experience which are conceptualized as experientially basic gestalts. They are the products of human nature and form multi-dimensional structural wholes (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980:19, 117, 118; 1982:193 ff). The concepts formed to express these experiences refer partly to inherent and partly to interactive properties. These kinds of experiences or experiential gestalts are natural in the sense that they are the products of human nature, and form multi-dimensional structural wholes. Some may be universal, while others will vary from culture to culture. The types of experience analysed by Lakoff and Johnson include, inter alia, spatial, physiological, psychological, mental, social, political, economic and religious experiences. They suggest that the concepts which appear in metaphorical definitions are those that correspond to these natural kinds of experience. Johnson (1987:30) has elaborated these insights by arguing that meaning, understanding and

rationality are constrained by non-propositional "image-schematic' structures such as for example temporal and spatial orientation which arise from our bodily experience and which are metaphorically projected and extended in order for us to understand reality.

Metaphors: More than semantic reality

The literature on metaphor abounds with publications concerning the interrelationship between analogy and metaphor. In the classic theory of metaphor there was always a reticence to equate metaphor with what was regarded as "proper analogy" (Burrel, 1973: 260). Ample reference to and evidence of the fact that some metaphors are actually more "necessary" than others (Ortony, 1975: 45-53) is found in literature on metaphor. "Necessary metaphors" (Snell) differ from metaphors found in everyday language and also from those used in poetry, scientific explanation and in religious contexts. They also differ from other semantic peculiarities such as idioms and figures of speech. They point to specific types of analogical relationships that are of such a nature that they cannot be ignored; that they have to be acknowledged. As such they are presupposed by all the other above-mentioned types of metaphors.[4] In both everyday knowledge and science it is not possible to rid ourselves of the analogical or metaphorical usages which might be called functional metaphors (Hart, 1984:156) or ontological "metaphors". This means that a distinction has to be made between metaphors as ontological "metaphors" (unavoidable analogical structures (Hart, 1984:156) or proper analogies and their linguistic elaboration.

[4] Edie (1975: 39) too, refers to the distinction between epiphors and diaphors, and argues that diaphors are more fundamental, root, and "necessary" metaphors which are frequently not recognized metaphors at all because of their absolute fundamental function of organizing experience.

These metaphors, which refer to the fundamental or ontological[5] analogies found in reality, distinguish themselves from other metaphorical usage in the sense that they designate actual states of affairs.[6]

2. CULTURAL UNIVERSALS: A CHRISTIAN IMPERATIVE?

The final question which needs to be addressed is whether the recogniton of the above-mentioned states of affairs in any way provides compelling evidence for the fact that a Christian ought to render a "realist" account of cultural universals and to what extent such a position would be a more theoretically obedient notion than, for example, nominalist, idealist or sociological accounts. This question can partially be answered by summarizing the main points of the argument developed in this essay:

- The existence of reality and human experience of the world is conditioned by structural conditions which warrant both stability and the possibility of change.

- Cross-cultural experience and communication points to the fact that such a "bridgehead" exists which at least makes rational and logical communication on the basis of the norms of logic possible. These ultimate grounds for the distinction between truth and falsity are obviously more than only conventional in nature. The Christian would advance the confession that these bases are God-given criteria, which transcend conventions.

[5] It would be more accurate to refer to "ontic" or "ontical" in this respect.

[6] Ricoeur (1976: 59) refers to something similar when he requires a fundamental distinction between metaphor and symbol. He writes that "Metaphor occurs in the already purified universe of the logos, while the symbol hesitates on the dividing line between bios and logos. It testifies to the primordial rootedness of Discourse in Life".

- It is exactly these structural givens which provide the guidelines for determining mistakes and the possibilities of semantic conflation.

Faith in God, who has created an orderly universe and who maintains it through His law-Word, necessitates the recognition that human experience takes place within the framework of conditions which structure it and which are not only the product of social and historical factors, nor only the result of linguistic conventions.

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