

METAPHORS We Live By

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Concepts We Live By

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.

The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.

But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. In most of the little things we do every day, we simply think and act more or less automatically along certain lines. Just what these lines are is by no means obvious. One way to find out is by looking at language. Since communication is based on the same conceptual system that we use in thinking and acting, language is an important source of evidence for what that system is like.

Primarily on the basis of linguistic evidence, we have found that most of our ordinary conceptual system is metaphorical in nature. And we have found a way to begin to identify in detail just what the metaphors are that structure how we perceive, how we think, and what we do.

To give some idea of what it could mean for a concept to be metaphorical and for such a concept to structure an everyday activity, let us start with the concept ARGUMENT and the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. This metaphor is reflected in our everyday language by a wide variety of expressions:

ARGUMENT IS WAR

Your claims are *indefensible*.
 He *attacked every weak point* in my argument.
 His criticisms were *right on target*.
 I *demolished* his argument.
 I've never *won* an argument with him.
 You disagree? Okay, *shoot!*
 If you use that *strategy*, he'll *wipe you out*.
 He *shot down* all of my arguments.

It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument—attack, defense, counterattack, etc.—reflects this. It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing.

Try to imagine a culture where arguments are not viewed in terms of war, where no one wins or loses, where there is no sense of attacking or defending, gaining or losing

ground. Imagine a culture where an argument is viewed as a dance, the participants are seen as performers, and the goal is to perform in a balanced and aesthetically pleasing way. In such a culture, people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently. But *we* would probably not view them as arguing at all: they would simply be doing something different. It would seem strange even to call what they were doing "arguing." Perhaps the most neutral way of describing this difference between their culture and ours would be to say that we have a discourse form structured in terms of battle and they have one structured in terms of dance.

This is an example of what it means for a metaphorical concept, namely, ARGUMENT IS WAR, to structure (at least in part) what we do and how we understand what we are doing when we argue. *The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.* It is not that arguments are a subspecies of war. Arguments and wars are different kinds of things—verbal discourse and armed conflict—and the actions performed are different kinds of actions. But ARGUMENT is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of WAR. The concept is metaphorically structured, the activity is metaphorically structured, and, consequently, the language is metaphorically structured.

Moreover, this is the *ordinary* way of having an argument and talking about one. The normal way for us to talk about attacking a position is to use the words "attack a position." Our conventional ways of talking about arguments presuppose a metaphor we are hardly ever conscious of. The metaphor is not merely in the words we use—it is in our very concept of an argument. The language of argument is not poetic, fanciful, or rhetorical; it is literal. We talk about arguments that way because we conceive of them that way—and we act according to the way we conceive of things.

The most important claim we have made so far is that metaphor is not just a matter of language, that is, of mere words. We shall argue that, on the contrary, human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical. This is what we mean when we say that the human conceptual system is metaphorically structured and defined. Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person's conceptual system. Therefore, whenever in this book we speak of metaphors, such as ARGUMENT IS WAR, it should be understood that *metaphor* means *metaphorical concept*.

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The Systematicity of Metaphorical Concepts

Arguments usually follow patterns; that is, there are certain things we typically do and do not do in arguing. The fact that we in part conceptualize arguments in terms of battle systematically influences the shape arguments take and the way we talk about what we do in arguing. Because the metaphorical concept is systematic, the language we use to talk about that aspect of the concept is systematic.

We saw in the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor that expressions from the vocabulary of war, e.g., *attack a position*, *undefensible*, *strategy*, *new line of attack*, *win*, *gain ground*, etc., form a systematic way of talking about the battling aspects of arguing. It is no accident that these expressions mean what they mean when we use them to talk about arguments. A portion of the conceptual network of battle partially characterizes the concept of an argument, and the language follows suit. Since metaphorical expressions in our language are tied to metaphorical concepts in a systematic way, we can use metaphorical linguistic expressions to study the nature of metaphorical concepts and to gain an understanding of the metaphorical nature of our activities.

To get an idea of how metaphorical expressions in everyday language can give us insight into the metaphorical nature of the concepts that structure our everyday activities, let us consider the metaphorical concept TIME IS MONEY as it is reflected in contemporary English.

TIME IS MONEY

You're *wasting* my time.

This gadget will *save* you hours.

The experientialist myth agrees that understanding does involve all of these elements. Its emphasis on interaction and interactional properties shows how meaning always is meaning *to* a person. And its emphasis on the construction of coherence via experiential gestalts provides an account of what it means for something to be significant to an individual. Moreover, it gives an account of how understanding uses the primary resources of the imagination via metaphor and how it is possible to give experience new meaning and to create new realities.

Where experientialism diverges from subjectivism is in its rejection of the Romantic idea that imaginative understanding is completely unconstrained.

In summary, we see the experientialist myth as capable of satisfying the real and reasonable concerns that have motivated the myths of both subjectivism and objectivism but without either the objectivist obsession with absolute truth or the subjectivist insistence that imagination is totally unrestricted.

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Understanding

We see a single human motivation behind the myths of both objectivism and subjectivism, namely, a concern for understanding. The myth of objectivism reflects the human need to understand the *external* world in order to be able to function successfully in it. The myth of subjectivism is focused on *internal* aspects of understanding—what the individual finds meaningful and what makes his life worth living. The experientialist myth suggests that these are not opposing concerns. It offers a perspective from which both concerns can be met at once.

The old myths share a common perspective: man as separate from his environment. Within the myth of objectivism, the concern for truth grows out of a concern for successful functioning. Given a view of man as separate from his environment, successful functioning is conceived of as *mastery over* the environment. Hence, the objectivist metaphors KNOWLEDGE IS POWER and SCIENCE PROVIDES CONTROL OVER NATURE.

The principal theme of the myth of subjectivism is the attempt to overcome the alienation that results from viewing man as separate from his environment and from other men. This involves an embracing of the self—of individuality and reliance upon personal feelings, intuition, and values. The Romanticist version involves reveling in the senses and the feelings and attempting to gain union with nature through passive appreciation of it.

The experientialist myth takes the perspective of man as part of his environment, not as separate from it. It focuses

on constant interaction with the physical environment and with other people. It views this interaction with the environment as involving mutual change. You cannot function within the environment without changing it or being changed by it.

Within the experientialist myth, understanding emerges from interaction, from constant negotiation with the environment and other people. It emerges in the following way: the nature of our bodies and our physical and cultural environment imposes a structure on our experience, in terms of natural dimensions of the sort we have discussed. Recurrent experience leads to the formation of categories, which are experiential gestalts with those natural dimensions. Such gestalts define coherence in our experience. We understand our experience directly when we see it as being structured coherently in terms of gestalts that have emerged directly from interaction with and in our environment. We understand experience metaphorically when we use a gestalt from one domain of experience to structure experience in another domain.

From the experientialist perspective, truth depends on understanding, which emerges from functioning in the world. It is through such understanding that the experientialist alternative meets the objectivist's need for an account of truth. It is through the coherent structuring of experience that the experientialist alternative satisfies the subjectivist's need for personal meaning and significance.

But experientialism provides more than just a synthesis that meets the motivating concerns of objectivism and subjectivism. The experientialist account of understanding provides a richer perspective on some of the most important areas of experience in our everyday lives:

- Interpersonal communication and mutual understanding
- Self-understanding
- Ritual
- Aesthetic experience
- Politics

We feel that objectivism and subjectivism both provide impoverished views of all of these areas because each misses the motivating concerns of the other. What they both miss in all of these areas is an interactionally based and creative understanding. Let us turn to an experientialist account of the nature of understanding in each of these areas.

Interpersonal Communication and Mutual Understanding

When people who are talking don't share the same culture, knowledge, values, and assumptions, mutual understanding can be especially difficult. Such understanding *is* possible through the negotiation of meaning. To negotiate meaning with someone, you have to become aware of and respect both the differences in your backgrounds and when these differences are important. You need enough diversity of cultural and personal experience to be aware that divergent world views exist and what they might be like. You also need patience, a certain flexibility in world view, and a generous tolerance for mistakes, as well as a talent for finding the right metaphor to communicate the relevant parts of unshared experiences or to highlight the shared experiences while deemphasizing the others. Metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and in communicating the nature of unshared experience. This skill consists, in large measure, of the ability to bend your world view and adjust the way you categorize your experience. Problems of mutual understanding are not exotic; they arise in all extended conversations where understanding is important.

When it really counts, meaning is almost never communicated according to the CONDUIT metaphor, that is, where one person transmits a fixed, clear proposition to another by means of expressions in a common language, where both parties have all the relevant common knowledge, assumptions, values, etc. When the chips are down, meaning is negotiated: you slowly figure out what you have in common,

what it is safe to talk about, how you can communicate unshared experience or create a shared vision. With enough flexibility in bending your world view and with luck and skill and charity, you may achieve some mutual understanding.

Communication theories based on the CONDUIT metaphor turn from the pathetic to the evil when they are applied indiscriminately on a large scale, say, in government surveillance or computerized files. There, what is most crucial for real understanding is almost never included, and it is assumed that the words in the file have meaning in themselves—disembodied, objective, understandable meaning. When a society lives by the CONDUIT metaphor on a large scale, misunderstanding, persecution, and much worse are the likely products.

Self-understanding

The capacity for self-understanding presupposes the capacity for mutual understanding. Common sense tells us that it's easier to understand ourselves than to understand other people. After all, we tend to think that we have direct access to our own feelings and ideas and not to anybody else's. Self-understanding seems prior to mutual understanding, and in some ways it is. But any really deep understanding of why we do what we do, feel what we feel, change as we change, and even believe what we believe, takes us beyond ourselves. Understanding of ourselves is not unlike other forms of understanding—it comes out of our constant interactions with our physical, cultural, and interpersonal environment. At a minimum, the skills required for *mutual* understanding are necessary even to approach *self*-understanding. Just as in mutual understanding we constantly search out commonalities of experience when we speak with other people, so in self-understanding we are always searching for what unifies our own diverse experiences in order to give coherence to our lives. Just as we seek out metaphors to highlight and make coherent what we have in common with

someone else, so we seek out *personal* metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes, and goals as well. A large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives. Self-understanding requires unending negotiation and renegotiation of the meaning of your experiences to yourself. In therapy, for example, much of self-understanding involves consciously recognizing previously unconscious metaphors and how we live by them. It involves the constant construction of new coherences in your life, coherences that give new meaning to old experiences. The process of self-understanding is the continual development of new life stories for yourself.

The experientialist approach to the process of self-understanding involves:

- Developing an awareness of the metaphors we live by and an awareness of where they enter into our everyday lives and where they do not

- Having experiences that can form the basis of alternative metaphors

- Developing an "experiential flexibility"

- Engaging in an unending process of viewing your life through new alternative metaphors

Ritual

We are constantly performing rituals, from casual rituals, like making the morning coffee by the same sequence of steps each day and watching the eleven o'clock news straight to the end (after we've seen it already at six o'clock); to going to football games, Thanksgiving dinners, and university lectures by distinguished visitors; and so on to the most solemn prescribed religious practices. All are repeated structured practices, some consciously designed in detail, some more consciously performed than others, and some emerging spontaneously. Each ritual is a re-

peated, coherently structured, and unified aspect of our experience. In performing them, we give structure and significance to our activities, minimizing chaos and disparity in our actions. In our terms, a ritual is one kind of experiential gestalt. It is a coherent sequence of actions, structured in terms of the natural dimensions of our experience. Religious rituals are typically metaphorical kinds of activities, which usually involve metonymies—real-world objects standing for entities in the world as defined by the conceptual system of the religion. The coherent structure of the ritual is commonly taken as paralleling some aspect of reality as it is seen through the religion.

Everyday personal rituals are also experiential gestalts consisting of sequences of actions structured along the natural dimensions of experience—a part-whole structure, stages, causal relationships, and means of accomplishing goals. Personal rituals are thus natural kinds of activities for individuals or for members of a subculture. They may or may not be metaphorical kinds of activities. For example, it is common in Los Angeles to engage in the ritual activity of driving by the homes of Hollywood stars. This is a metaphorical kind of activity based on the metonymy *THE HOME STANDS FOR THE PERSON* and the metaphor *PHYSICAL CLOSENESS IS PERSONAL CLOSENESS*. Other everyday rituals, whether metaphorical or not, provide experiential gestalts that can be the basis of metaphors, e.g., “You don’t know what you’re opening the door to,” “Let’s roll up our sleeves and get down to work,” etc.

We suggest that

The metaphors we live by, whether cultural or personal, are partially preserved in ritual.

Cultural metaphors, and the values entailed by them, are propagated by ritual.

Ritual forms an indispensable part of the experiential basis for our cultural metaphorical systems. There can be no culture without ritual.

Similarly, there can be no coherent view of the self without personal ritual (typically of the casual and spontaneously emerging sort). Just as our personal metaphors are not random but form systems coherent with our personalities, so our personal rituals are not random but are coherent with our view of the world and ourselves and with our system of personal metaphors and metonymies. Our implicit and typically unconscious conceptions of ourselves and the values that we live by are perhaps most strongly reflected in the little things we do over and over, that is, in the casual rituals that have emerged spontaneously in our daily lives.

Aesthetic Experience

From the experientialist perspective, metaphor is a matter of *imaginative rationality*. It permits an understanding of one kind of experience in terms of another, creating coherences by virtue of imposing gestalts that are structured by natural dimensions of experience. New metaphors are capable of creating new understandings and, therefore, new realities. This should be obvious in the case of poetic metaphor, where language is the medium through which new conceptual metaphors are created.

But metaphor is not merely a matter of language. It is a matter of conceptual structure. And conceptual structure is not merely a matter of the intellect—it involves all the natural dimensions of our experience, including aspects of our sense experiences: color, shape, texture, sound, etc. These dimensions structure not only mundane experience but aesthetic experience as well. Each art medium picks out certain dimensions of our experience and excludes others. Artworks provide new ways of structuring our experience in terms of these natural dimensions. Works of art provide new experiential gestalts and, therefore, new coherences. From the experientialist point of view, art is, in general, a

matter of imaginative rationality and a means of creating new realities.

Aesthetic experience is thus not limited to the official art world. It can occur in any aspect of our everyday lives—whenever we take note of, or create for ourselves, new coherences that are not part of our conventionalized mode of perception or thought.

Politics

Political debate typically is concerned with issues of freedom and economics. But one can be both free and economically secure while leading a totally meaningless and empty existence. We see the metaphorical concepts of FREEDOM, EQUALITY, SAFETY, ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE, POWER, etc., as being different ways of getting *indirectly* at issues of meaningful existence. They are all necessary aspects of an adequate discussion of the issue, but, to our knowledge, no political ideology addresses the main issue head-on. In fact, many ideologies argue that matters of personal or cultural meaningfulness are secondary or to be addressed later. Any such ideology is dehumanizing.

Political and economic ideologies are framed in metaphorical terms. Like all other metaphors, political and economic metaphors can hide aspects of reality. But in the area of politics and economics, metaphors matter more, because they constrain our lives. A metaphor in a political or economic system, by virtue of what it hides, can lead to human degradation.

Consider just one example: LABOR IS A RESOURCE. Most contemporary economic theories, whether capitalist or socialist, treat labor as a natural resource or commodity, on a par with raw materials, and speak in the same terms of its cost and supply. What is hidden by the metaphor is the nature of the labor. No distinction is made between meaningful labor and dehumanizing labor. For all of the labor

statistics, there is none on *meaningful* labor. When we accept the LABOR IS A RESOURCE metaphor and assume that the cost of resources defined in this way should be kept down, then cheap labor becomes a good thing, on a par with cheap oil. The exploitation of human beings through this metaphor is most obvious in countries that boast of “a virtually inexhaustible supply of cheap labor”—a neutral-sounding economic statement that hides the reality of human degradation. But virtually all major industrialized nations, whether capitalist or socialist, use the same metaphor in their economic theories and policies. The blind acceptance of the metaphor can hide degrading realities, whether meaningless blue-collar and white-collar industrial jobs in “advanced” societies or virtual slavery around the world.