

NOTES FOR PAPER ON METAPHOR

Quotation from "Metaphors We Live By" by Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1980.

Page 56. "We claim that most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured, that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts. This raises an important question about the grounding of our conceptual system. Are there any concepts at all that are understood directly without metaphor? If not, how can we understand anything at all?"

According to the authors, the prime candidates for concepts that are understood directly are the spatial concepts, such as "up." Our spatial concept "up" arises out of our spatial experience. We have bodies and we stand erect. "Almost every movement we make involves a motor program that either changes our up-down orientation, maintains it, presupposes it or takes it into account in some way. Our constant physical activity in the world, even when we sleep, makes an up-down orientation not merely relevant to our physical activity but centrally relevant." (page 56, emphasis added)

This is an example of the limits to which one can proceed relying on cognitive, conscious psychological experiences. There are earlier, more fundamental biological experiences that anticipate the spatial concepts. These are the fundamental biological processes of ingesting (food), expelling (feces and urine). In addition, there are the repeated very early experiences of being held in the mother's arms and of being covered by blankets. Thus, so many of the metaphors that the authors refer to about containers have an antecedent, experiential basis in the earliest fundamental biological interchanges. In a previous paper, I discussed how, for certain persons, much of the world is experienced as a metaphor of the relationship to feces. Lewin has indicated how much of the world may be experienced as metaphors for incorporation into the body and also the stream of interchange between individuals as reflecting the activities of the stream of urine.

One has to emphasize constantly in the background of all conceptualization its metaphoric base, as indeed Lakoff and Johnson do. But one has also to pay attention to the persistence of the quasi-visual, unconscious fantasy thinking which serves to condense meaning, not only into verbal expressions but even into dreams. Take, for example, the American Indian expression, "White man speaks with forked tongue." The image indicates the judgment that the thoughts and intentions of the white man go off into two different directions. One has to make a choice which one to follow because one is puzzled which is the right path to pursue. Here earlier experience in walking and traveling is

-2-

condensed into a metaphoric expression, but unconsciously the speaker recalls at the moment his or others' previous experiences of actually having to make a choice of paths. The transposition of remembered experience, visually conceptualized into a spoken metaphor in another context, is identical with the mechanisms that enter into the formation of images in dreams.

In this connection, cite the dream of the patient who was abused as a child and forced to perform fellatio by her father. She had the fantasy at the time that she could bite off his penis and acquire it for herself and that, with it, she could do the things that her father did with his penis. It was not the experience of the incest and abuse that was traumatic at the time. What was traumatic to the patient was her fear of her wish and her fear of retaliation for wanting to bite off and incorporate the penis. That was expressed in the dream, the text of which will follow. In one part of the dream, the patient saw herself riding on a horse in a path through fields of wheat. When she was a child, she wanted a pony very much. In the material surrounding the dream, she was angry that her brother had gotten a desk for his birthday and she had gotten nothing. She was an avid horsewoman. Thus, the image in the dream and the pursuit of her hobby of riding were metaphoric representations of an unconscious wish to possess phallus and use it in sexual relations with women -- the mother.

Two metaphors that indicated intuitive appreciation of infantile sexuality and the origin of narcissism, overestimation of the self. The Yiddish expression referring to people who have an inflated opinion of themselves: "He shits money and he pees olive oil." This is paralleled by the American expression: "He thinks his shit is chocolate ice cream." Now chocolate ice cream can, in fact, resemble in structure and texture feces, but the ice cream idea adds on the additional connection of something delectable to be ingested and enjoyed.

It should be noted that in many metaphors a wealth of linked associations is implied but not explicitly stated. This reflects on how information is processed and how our associations are implied and appreciated even though never explicitly stated. Lakoff and Johnson come close to this idea but do not grasp it precisely. They speak about the used part and the unused part of metaphors. They give the example, theories are buildings, e.g., page 53, "His theory has thousands of little rooms with long winding corridors." Or "complex theories usually have problems with the plumbing." These sentences, they say, fall outside the domain of normal literal language and are part of what is usually called "figurative" or "imaginative" language.

-3-

Lakoff and Johnson, page 54: "Each of the metaphorical expressions we have talked about so far...is used within a whole system of metaphorical concepts -- concepts that we constantly use in living and thinking. These expressions, like all other words and phrasal lexical items in the language, are fixed by convention. In addition to these cases which are parts of whole metaphorical systems, there are idiosyncratic metaphorical expressions that stand alone and are not used systematically in our language and thought."

The authors go on to give the expression of the well-known idea like "the foot of the mountain," "head of cabbage," "leg of table," as isolated instances of metaphorical concepts where there is only one instance of a used part. For example, in the expression "the foot of the mountain," it is only the foot that is used "...In normal discourse, we do not speak of the head, shoulders and trunk of a mountain, though in special context it is possible to construct novel metaphorical expressions based on unused parts."

This is exactly what happens and what is called in psychoanalysis primary process thinking, which appears in consciousness as novel metaphorical expressions. The authors even go on to speak of instances where people talk of fighting or conquering a mountain or of cartoons in which mountains become animate and their peaks become heads. So, in fact, the authors do appreciate the intrusion of primary process thinking but they say, "They are marginal to our culture and our language...and they do not systematically interact with other metaphorical concepts because so little of them is used." So little of them is used, indeed, in conscious, rational thinking, but the unconscious influence of such metaphorical thinking runs through all mental activity -- rational, irrational, awake and asleep, dreams and poetry, etc. The authors say that the fact that they are not used makes them relatively uninteresting for our purposes but they have enough circumspection to say, "but not completely so since they can be extended in their unused part in coining novel metaphorical expressions, making jokes, etc." The authors come close to but cannot exploit the influence of novel metaphorical expressions, because they lack a theory of unconscious mental processes.

The authors go on to say, "Examples like the foot of the mountain are idiosyncratic, unsystematic and isolated. They do not interact with other metaphors, play no particularly interesting role in our conceptual system and hence are not metaphors that we live by." (page 55)

Continuing quote from page 55, "The only signs of life they have is that they have the extended(?) in subcultures and that their unused portions serve as the basis for (relatively uninteresting)

-4-

novel metaphors. If any metaphorical expressions deserve to be called 'dead,' it is these, though they do have a bare spark of life in that they are understood partly in terms of marginal metaphorical concepts like a mountain is a person."

Page 57. "What we call direct physical experience is never merely a matter of having a body of a certain sort; rather every experience takes place within a background of cultural presuppositions. It can be misleading, therefore, to speak of direct physical experience as though there were some core of immediate experience which we then 'interpret' in terms of our conceptual system. Cultural assumptions, values and attitudes are not a conceptual overlay which we may or may not place upon experience as we choose. It would be more correct to say that all experience is cultural through and through, that we experience 'our world' in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself."

The quotation above articulates all the shortcomings that follow a purely "objective" conscious psychological approach to experience. Before our experience is cultural through and through, it is physical through and through. Acculturation begins sometime later than apprehension of our experience through our physical being. This is why children throughout the world in different cultures, having gone through identical challenges in the "pre-cultural years," tend to have certain uniform characteristics in spite of vast cultural differences.

In discussing the issue, "argument is war," the authors state that, even if you never fought in a fist fight, much less a war, you will still conceive of arguments and execute them according to argument as war metaphor, because that metaphor is built into the conceptual system of the culture in which you live. What the authors miss there is the fact that while, on one level, in argumentation one states premises, cites evidence, draws conclusions, at another level, the person who is arguing is actually thinking of fighting and killing, only he doesn't always know it. Or more correctly, he doesn't know that he is really thinking it. This is where the unconscious dimension enters. So, for example, some individuals may win an argument through brilliant presentation of material and then find themselves terribly depressed. That evening they may have a dream associated with the theme of murder.

On pages 79 to 81, the authors first make the distinction between conversation and argument. Then they offer the parallel between argument and war by demonstrating that the metaphors used to express the vicissitudes of an argument can correspond precisely to those used pertaining to war. What they do not take into account is the affective component and the unconscious elements

-5-

that enter into an argument. Thus, for example, if a conversation developed into an argument, and the argument became so heated that one of the participants, in desperation, punched his opposite number in the jaw -- at this point we can conceive of the following intervention by a third party. He asks the puncher, "Why did you strike that man?" Answer: "He made me angry." "Why did he make you angry?" "Because he didn't listen to reason. He would not accept my point of view." The third-party observer asks, "Now that you have punched him, is he more reasonable, will he accept your point of view?"

The answer is obvious. Something new, something different has been introduced, something that was latent in the difference between a rational interchange of views and a hostile attempt to force a view upon someone else. What was latent was an emerging consequence of some fantasy, either installed upon one's narcissism, relating to whatever past experiences the individual has had of that nature and/or some specific modal interaction with some other object, with the result that the current adversary in the argument was unconsciously equated with the original object and treated accordingly. The point is that, without the dimension of unconscious mentation, such analyses of metaphor become circular.

On page 81, the authors make clear their basic orientation: "Structuring our experience in terms of such multi-dimensional gestalts is what makes our experience coherent. We experience a conversation as an argument when the war gestalt fits our perceptions and actions in the conversation." If ever there was a circular argument, that is it.