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Philosophy Disrobed: Lakoff and Johnson's Call for Empirically Responsible Philosophy

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Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999. Pp. xiv + 624. \$20.00 pbk. 0-465-05674-1

In answer to a friend's query about my current pursuits, I hoisted Lakoff and Johnson's six-hundred-page magnum opus into his hands. "Reviewing this." Thoughtfully weighing the imposing book in one palm, he pronounced: "Philosophy in the Flesh? It needs to go on a diet!" I laughingly agreed, then in good philosopher's form analyzed his joke. He had conceived the book metaphorically as a person, as when we speak of books "inspiring" us or being "great company" and even as being "fat" or "thin." His cleverness lay in perceiving a novel entailment of this metaphor: just as an overweight person may need to diet, a long book may need to be shortened. In addition, he used a conventional metaphor in which means (to ends) are conceived as paths (to destinations), thus one may "go on" a diet for the purpose of losing weight as one goes on a path toward a destination.

All in the spirit of Lakoff and Johnson. "The question is clear," they say. "Do you choose empirical responsibility or a priori philosophical assumptions? Most of what you believe about philosophy and much of what you believe about life will depend on your answer" (551). Choosing the path of empirical responsibility, we are primed to accept three central findings about the mind and language that have emerged

from “second generation” cognitive science (i.e., freed of the assumptions of analytic philosophy):

1. *The Cognitive Unconscious*. Most thought—ninety-five percent, as a rule of thumb—operates beneath the tip of the iceberg of conscious awareness. Thus, there exists a “cognitive unconscious,” cognitive defined very broadly to include all “mental operations concerned with conceptual systems, meaning, inference, and language” (12). Thought isn’t repressed à la Freud; it just works too quickly and automatically for us to catch it in the act, and it isn’t directly accessible via Cartesian introspection. Among the key constituents of the cognitive unconscious are metaphors, metonymies, folk theories, image schemas, basic-level categories, and prototypes. These are “part of our automatic cultural heritage,” and since they are “embodied in our synapses,” they resist change (414). By disclosing our use of these structures, cognitive science affords limited freedom from “cognitive slavery,” that is, “uncritical dependence on our unconscious metaphors” (538). The history of philosophy has been marked by such slavery, since “the conceptual systems of philosophers are no more consciously accessible than those of anyone else” (136).

2. *The Embodiment of Mind*. Concepts and the mind in general are embodied, though not in the trifling computational sense in which independently structured mental software needs to run on neural hardware. The body is in the mind. That is, conceptual structures ride piggyback on and evolved from basic sensory and motor systems (20). The most pervasive instance of this is metaphorical thought, which involves the projection in our brains of “activation patterns from sensorimotor areas to higher cortical areas” (77). Due to the central role of embodied metaphor, reason is fundamentally imaginative, rather than disembodied, universal, transcendental, and literal. This is supported by convergent evidence from multiple methodologies, including linguistic analysis, psychological experiments, etymology, gesture studies, language acquisition studies, and studies of American Sign Language (81–86). That our conceiving minds fit the world is no mystery. Our minds “have evolved from our sensorimotor systems, which have in turn evolved to allow us to function well in our physical environment” (43–44).

3. *Metaphorical Thought*. Metaphors are inescapable and ineliminable. They involve conceptual mappings, realized physically in our brains, of knowledge and inference patterns from a concrete source domain to a typically more abstract target domain. Thus, metaphors “are a consequence of the nature of our brains, our bodies, and the world we inhabit” (59). Lakoff and Johnson’s analyses are much more sophisticated than the clumsy figures in their 1980 *Metaphors We Live By* that promise an “experiential basis.” In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, they locate the experiential basis in a Dewey-esque primary experience in which a metaphor’s source and target become conflated. For example, our everyday experience of getting information through vision gives rise to a conception of knowing in terms of seeing, if you see what I mean. And the widely shared experience

of motion-situations, as when we are on a path and literally see something “ahead of us,” motivates understanding the future as ahead of an observer and the past as behind. Time may be in motion relative to us (“Valentine’s day is fast approaching”) or we may be in motion relative to it (“We’re coming up on Valentine’s day”). See?

Far from being arbitrary, conventional metaphors like these are motivated and structured by the kinds of bodies we have and the environments in which we live out our lives. Although many metaphors are shared across cultures due to the similarity of human bodies and brains, our interactive experience is far too fecund to predict in advance exactly what metaphors will emerge in a culture. For example, in Aymara, a Chilean language, the past is in front and the future is behind (thus *mayamara*, “eye year” or “front year,” means “last year”), motivated by the visible presence of an action’s consequences and the invisibility of the future (141).

Primary metaphors, which are blended to form complex metaphors, have literal sensorimotor concepts as source domains (49–57). Here are some examples:

- Vision (Knowing is Seeing: “Do you see my point?”)
- Motion (Time is Motion: “Fall passed by quickly.”)
- Reaching destinations (Purposes are Destinations: “Peace is a ways off, but they’re getting there.”)
- Object manipulation (Understanding is Grasping: “I’m trying to grasp your argument.”)
- Exertion of force (Causes are Physical Forces: “I was pushed to do it.”)
- Bounded regions (States are Locations: “She’s in a depression.”)
- Vertical orientation (More is Up/Less is Down: “Prices rose.”)
- Bodily orientation (Happy is Up/Sad is Down: “I’m feeling down.”)

In contrast with analytic philosophy, Lakoff and Johnson reveal that only a fraction of meaning is literal and propositional. In the absence of metaphor, “literal” concepts are fleshless. They write:

Imagine a concept of love without physical force—that is, without attraction, electricity, magnetism—and without union, madness, illness, magic, nurturance, journeys, closeness, heat, or giving of oneself. Take away all these metaphorical ways of conceptualizing love, and there’s not a whole lot left. What’s left is the mere literal skeleton. (71–72)

What these three findings of cognitive science add up to is an embodied realism that contrasts with symbol-system realism and its compatriots the correspondence theory and analytic philosophy. These maximize the mind-world, subject-object, conception-perception gap bequeathed to philosophy by René Descartes and crystallized by Immanuel Kant. Embodied realism, in contrast, “gives up on being able to know things-in-themselves, but, through embodiment, explains how

we can have knowledge that, although it is not absolute, is nonetheless sufficient to allow us to function and flourish” (95). The idea of a disembodied truth is arrogant and unrealistic because what makes knowledge possible “is our embodiment, not our transcendence of it, and our imagination, not our avoidance of it” (93). Since, as William James recognized, there are no truths without the trail of the human serpent, all truths are truths-for-us; they do not magically correspond to a hidden reality-in-itself. The most sophisticated empirical inquiries lead at best, say Lakoff and Johnson, to “locally optimal” theories that are comprehensive, though not fully so, and are bolstered by convergent evidence. Quantum mechanics and general relativity, for example, “may be locally optimal globally incommensurable theories” (92).

In part 2, Lakoff and Johnson apply the tools of second-generation cognitive science to some major philosophical categories: time, events and causes, the mind, the self, and morality. They urge, “[O]nly after such empirical work has been completed can an empirically responsible philosophy emerge” (134).

Part 3 explores “the cognitive science of philosophy,” with analyses of the metaphors and folk theories of the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes and the enlightenment mind, Kantian morality, analytic philosophy, and Noam Chomsky. Lakoff and Johnson conclude with a “must read” study of the theory of rational action (i.e., game theory’s model of means-end rationality as calculative, literal, disembodied, and dispassionate) and its currently destructive role in economics, international relations, environmental policy, and education-as-business. Much of part 3 is devoted to laying bare assumptions that persist into the present as pillars of the philosophy of mind, such as the assumption that all thought is conscious and the mind is directly accessible to itself. Metaphors are here shown to drive philosophical reasoning, rather than being ad hoc embellishments of rationally pure cerebrations: “Philosophers use the same cognitive resources that everyone else does when they think and reason” (541). This insight motivates the bold—or brazen—claim that “second-generation cognitive science and, especially, its theory of conceptual metaphor are necessary if philosophy is to understand itself” (344).

Critical reviews of *Philosophy in the Flesh*, such as those in *The New York Times Book Review* (21 Feb. 1999) and *Civilization* (Feb./Mar. 1999), hearken back to perpetually reinvented, sophisticated misunderstandings of classical American pragmatism. Lakoff and Johnson dismiss external reality, truth, morality, and philosophy, clamor objectivists. They throw our intellectual compass overboard by “echoing the multicultural clamor of contemporary America” in their rejection of absolute objectivity. Or conversely, Lakoff and Johnson remain squarely within the totalizing confines of scientism, say some postmodernists. Such dismissive criticisms stall inquiry and could only stem from a cursory reading of the book. In contrast, let me identify six problems for further investigation.

1. Lakoff and Johnson have a distracting tendency to lapse into a nonpluralistic voice. Cognitive semantics, privileged among methodologies, is presented

as a sort of straight and narrow path to understanding our conceptual systems. This is the role of “cognitive semantics in particular” (136), without which philosophy is the blind leading the blind. But there is a simple, logical difficulty here: Their success in arguing for the cognitive unconscious, the embodied mind, and metaphorical thought does not additionally establish an exclusive status for the methodology of cognitive semantics. Nor does the fact of convergent evidence necessarily make their manual of classificatory schemes preeminent.

2. It is indisputable that philosophers, no matter how keenly introspective, do not have “an adequate understanding of their own conceptual systems” (136). Lakoff and Johnson provide an in-road to rendering our conceptual tools more intelligent, and thus more effective and artful. They thereby advance John Dewey’s project of “intellectual disrobing” by enabling us to inspect intellectual habits critically to see, as Dewey puts it, “what they are made of and what wearing them does to us.”

Nonetheless, it does not follow from this that philosophy prior to cognitive science was only five percent relevant to understanding who we are (implied on pages 12–13+). Nor does it follow that we are unable to function and even flourish without full awareness of the inner workings of our conceptual tools. For instance, even to one convinced that empirical research is essential to normative ethics, it is surprising to read that, “to act morally, . . . we must, at the very least, understand our unconscious moral systems and how they function” (343), as though moral action was born twenty years ago with cognitive semantics.

3. Contrary to their own disparagement of “result-driven” inquiries (496), some examples appear forced, including “down to earth” as a metaphor of self-control (275) and “I missed my chance” as deriving from hunting to get something to eat (197). In general, Lakoff and Johnson’s enthusiasm for analyzable conceptual structure at times outstrips the evidence, and this raises the possibility that they have at points been taken in by their own luminous clarities. (Their penchant for isolating structures also makes it advisable to keep a volume of James’s *Principles of Psychology* at hand to remind us of the inexhaustible relations that inhere in our immediate experience!)

4. Given dualistic connotations, Kantian terms such as *conceptualize*, *understanding*, and *reason* may be inadequate to their project. Furthermore, they need more explicitly to distance their theory of “primary metaphor” from the neo-Kantian project of identifying a universal core of human categories transcending cultures.

5. Truth, to the extent that they offer a theory, is treated as a working coherence between our conceptual metaphors and our categories (21). Yet, Lakoff and Johnson also speak of understandings as true insofar as they are “apt.” This apparent tension between coherentist and pragmatic views needs to be worked through. Perhaps, instead of relegating Dewey as merely good “for his time” (xi), Lakoff and Johnson could find an ally in his theory that truths are those transactive understandings we can trustingly act upon.

6. The emphasis Johnson places on narrative structure in *The Body in the*

Mind and Moral Imagination is disappointingly absent here. Sidestepping narrative not only downplays the imaginative role of culturally inherited stories and myths, but also ignores our particularity, our unique stories. A philosophy in the flesh should be more, not less, responsive to the role narrative plays in our world views.

When a subject so filled with imaginative riches as our metaphorization of the cosmos is subsumed under the steely guise of “cognitive science,” some philosophers will be initially put off. However, *Philosophy in the Flesh* is good theory (from *theamai*, to behold). It enlarges and stimulates observations about how our experience hangs together. Therein lay its tremendous philosophic value.